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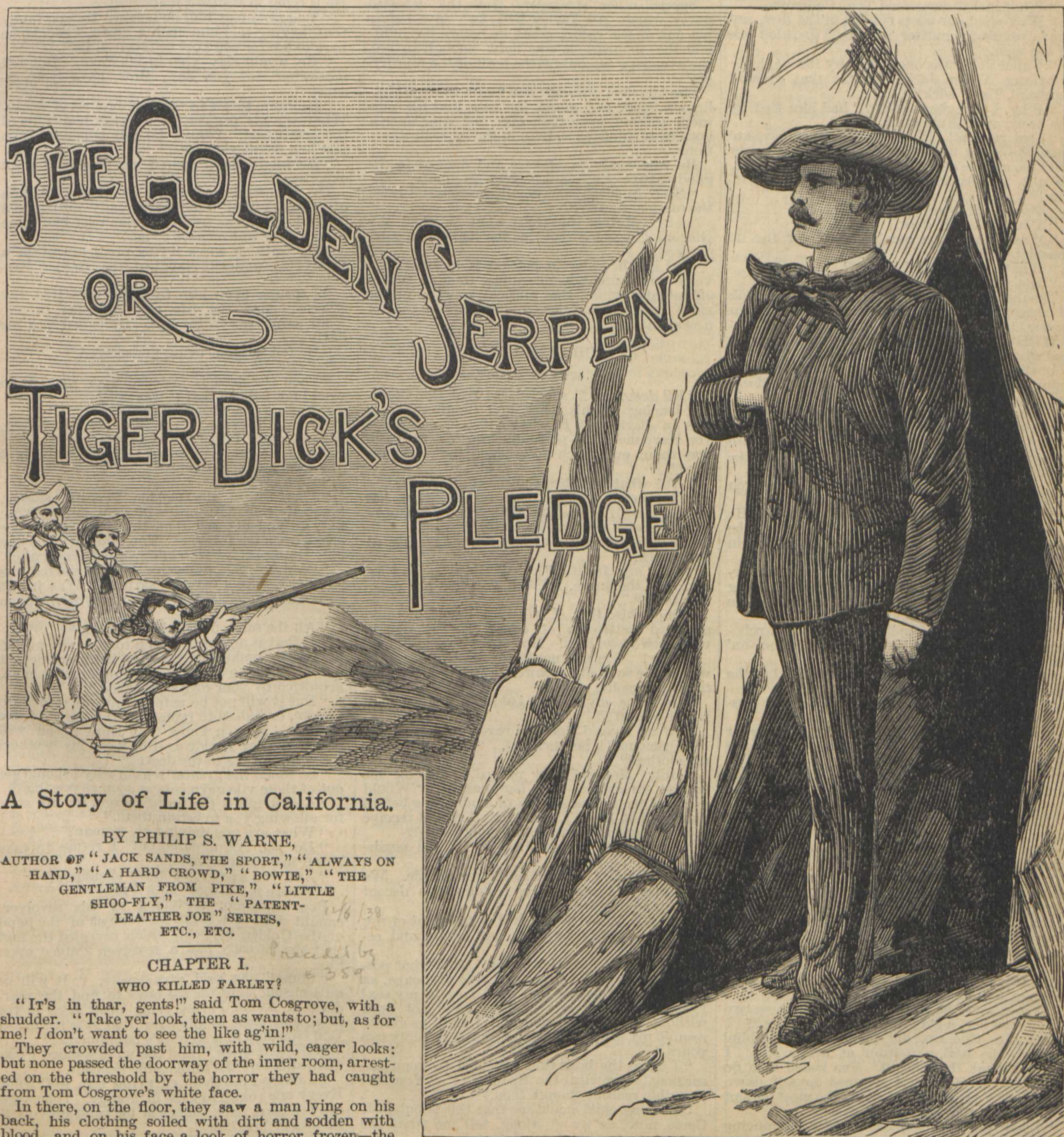
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A Story of Life in California.

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HAND," "A HARD CROWD," "BOWIE," "THE
GENTLEMAN FROM PIKE," "LITTLE
SHOO-FLY," THE "PATENT-
LEATHER JOE" SERIES,
ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

WHO KILLED FARLEY?

"It's in thar, gents!" said Tom Cosgrove, with a shudder. "Take yer look, them as wants to; but, as for me! I don't want to see the like ag'in!"

They crowded past him, with wild, eager looks; but none passed the doorway of the inner room, arrested on the threshold by the horror they had caught from Tom Cosgrove's white face.

In there, on the floor, they saw a man lying on his back, his clothing soiled with dirt and sodden with blood, and on his face a look of horror frozen—the mouth agape, the blue-glazed eyes staring wide.

"It's all day with Ad Farley!"

"You bet!"

THE GOLDEN SERPENT DROPPED UPON ONE KNEE, AND RESTING HER ELBOW ON THE OTHER, TO FORM A REST FOR A STEADY AIM, BROUGHT HER CARBINE TO BEAR ON THE MOTIONLESS FIGURE THAT WAITED HER VENGEANCE.

"An' him a square man, take him all round."
"A man as stood by Coyote when it looked as if the devil had her!"

"An' ye say that that leetle tiger-cat done it, Tom?"

"Didn't she?—an' him that never put his hand to her but as if she was silk."

"But what fur did she do it, an' she no quarrel wid 'um?"

"What fur? What do they all do it fur? He was too soft with her; an' she soured on him."

"That's always the way! It's a bit of a sthick, wanct in a whoile, that kapes all in ordher! Faith, who she could foind more to her likin' than Ad Farley I dunno."

"Did you spot the little Greaser, Don Giacomo, what come a-buzzin' of her, night before last?—the minute Mr. Farley's back was turned!"

The men turned with a start at the high-pitched voice that cast this insinuation. Behind them stood a very stout woman, with hands on hips, a flush of anger on her face, and the flash of malice in her eyes.

"She's been that sulky these two days," she went on, "that a saint wouldn't put up with it! And here she's a-plannin' to butcher the master the minute he set foot in his own house!"

The clatter of hoofs broke upon the night; and the men issued from the house to see who was approaching.

A little knot of riders dashed from the darkness into the circle of light.

Their horses gave signs of hard riding, and the men looked worn. Some were blood-stained; all wore the dogged frown of sullen defeat.

"What luck?" demanded Tom Cosgrove.

"We've had our noses rubbed in the dirt, an' that's what's the matter with us!" growled one of the men.

"Yaller Jack was one too many fur ye?"

"Hang Yaller Jack! It was that greased lightnin', Tiger Dick!"

"Why, I thought the sheriff had him tied by the heels, up to Mulligan's Bend."

"Tied nothin'! He shook 'em somehow, an' come down on us with a gang that got away with us, an' the sheriff's posse, an' Yaller Jack, an' all! Old Satan himself couldn't stand ag'in' him!"

"Tiger Dick loose! That settles it!"

"You jest bet it does!"

"Waal, Ham, you hain't come hyar fur no consolation."

"What's the reason I hain't?"

"Jest you go in yonder, an' see!"

The men made way for him; and with a look of curiosity and apprehensive expectation Ham Losier entered the house.

Without pause he strode across the threshold, and stood beside the ghastly corpse.

In silence he gazed down upon it, his face hardening, the somber shadows of bitter hatred deepening in his eyes.

"Waal, that's a dog-gone shame!" he said, presently, shading his head in gloomy regret. "They finished him too! They left him jest life enough to come home to roost! But whar's—whar's—"

He lifted his head, and looked about in search of some one, with increasing wonder.

"Whar's the leetle woman?" he asked. "He must 'a' made a bee-line fur her. I reckon the sight of him has knocked her out. Is she in yon?"

And he indicated with his thumb a heavy curtain which fell before a doorway communicating with a room adjoining the one in which he stood.

"He did make a bee-line fur her," corroborated Tom Cosgrove; "but she ain't in yon, an' don't you furgit it!"

"Eh!" ejaculated Ham, impressed by the manner of the other.

"Do ye know who done that?" asked Cosgrove, pointing at the corpse.

"Who done it?" repeated Losier, staring at the body stupidly. "No! How should I know? Who did do it?"

"That leetle tarantular of a Greaser—the Golden Serpent herself!"

"The deuce you say! She wasn't thar!"

"No more she was. But she was hyar! An' when he crawled to her feet, only to lick her hand like a dog, she finished him off!—that's what she done!"

"No! You're a liar, Tom Cosgrove!" shouted Ham, starting to a savage attitude, and clutching the butt of his revolver.

His manner showed that his rage was not directed toward the man into whose teeth he hurled the lie so fiercely, but at the woman charged with so base treachery.

Cosgrove had planned to rouse this demon of revenge, and he understood his success.

"I seen her!" he declared. "With these two eyes I seen her, a-standin' in that thar door! I heard him ride up, an' then come stumblin' through the hall, a-groanin' at every step. I knowed what that meant. I've heard men do that before. So I jest humped myself down hyar, bein's as Ad Farley wa'n't the most patient o' men when thar was anythin'—"

"Blast yer eyes!" roared Losier, advancing threateningly upon the too critical Tom, "stow all that, an' come to the p'int!"

"Waal, I jest humped myself down hyar; an' thar she stands in that thar doorway, a-hangin' on to the curtains like this hyar—an' she with her mask on yit, though it was three hours after we had bounced the last stool-pigeon."

"I seen he was all broke up. Here he comes staggerin' across the room, a-holdin' out of his hands to her, jest like you see me now. You could 'a' knocked him down with a feather, he was that weak—an' him a-gaspin'!"

"Pipa, my darlin'!"

"Waal, when he gits within two steps of her, she jumps fur him, without never a word nor a sound, an' socks him one home with her stiletto, an' he goes straight over backwards, as you see him now."

"Then I says:

"Good God!"

"An' she looks up an' sees me, an' comes fur me screechin'."

"Ham, I give her a clean passage, an' I ain't ashamed to say it. An' the way she went through that thar hall, onto the boss that Ad had left at the door, an' away, wa'n't slow, now you'd better b'lieve!"

This story of the ghastly crime was illustrated with such dramatic gestures that the listeners saw in imagination every ghastly detail.

Ham Losier was wrought to fury.

"Boys," he shouted, "Ad Farley's blood will never sink into the ground till we stretch the neck o' that leetle fraud! She's kept this hyar camp in hot water ever sence she struck it; an' she'll do the like wharever she goes. So I say, switch her off the track before she gits the chance to knock any more good men out!"

Several other stragglers from the defeated party which Ad Farley had two days before led out of the camp, came in before daylight; and the moment it was light enough to see, the avengers set out on the trail of the murderer.

She had fled through the night toward Mulligan's Bend; and about the time that her pursuers entered upon their task, she came upon a horseman riding as swiftly in the opposite direction.

He was small in stature and dressed in the gaudy attire of a Spanish-Mexican dandy.

"Stop, in the name of all the fiends!" cried the masked fugitive.

"Ah! Mother of God! what is this, my Giacomo?" was the reply, as the challenged rider drew rein.

And lo! the rider in petticoats spoke with a voice unmistakably masculine, though rather effeminate; while the musical soprano of the rider in breeches was as unquestionably that of a woman!

CHAPTER II.

A WOMAN'S WIT.

"*Mil demonios!*" snarled the real Don Giacomo, tearing off his mask, and flinging it from him in disgust. "In what a fiend's snare did you leave me! I to personate you! *Sacramento!* was there ever such folly since the world began?"

"Ah! what is it then that has happened?"

"Happened? Fiends and furies! what has not happened? I demand that you relieve me of this execrable raiment *instantly!*"

The enraged Spaniard was fairly foaming at the mouth.

"You are frantic!" cried she who had led him into the snare. "Will you tell me nothing, then?"

"Only this: that I will be relieved of these accursed petticoats at once! To the demon with such fastenings! How am I to undo this?"

"Stay! You are needlessly destroying what will not be so easily repaired. Has the Evil One taken possession of you?"

"Give me my clothes back! Come! I will not be put off!"

And he leveled a cocked revolver at her face.

"Dismount!" he shrieked. "Give me back my clothes!"

"Holy Mother!" she panted, realizing his frantic earnestness and her danger. "Would you put me to the shame of undressing before you? What have I done that I should receive such barbarous treatment at your hands?"

"I will have my own self back!" he persisted.

"You shall. But let us be reasonable. We will find a place where I can have decent privacy to disrobe in."

"Do you think that I will let you out of my sight, that you may trick me again, and escape?"

"But I have not tricked you. And what possible object could I have in trying to escape, as you say, with clothes that so ill become my sex? I assure you, these two days have not been without vexation to me; and I shall as gladly resume my proper character as you possibly can yours."

"I curse the hour that I yielded to your persuasions!" growled the Spaniard. "You had plausible reasons enough then."

"But any child could see that this is but just. Come, now! as we go along, tell me what has driven you to this state of fury."

"Not that way!" he cried, seeing that she

would have continued toward Coyote. "If you value your life, you will put all possible distance between yourself and this accursed spot, never to revisit it."

"As you please. I must be guided entirely by you until you have enlightened my ignorance."

She wheeled her horse, and they returned over the way she had come, toward Mulligan's Bend.

"Now, what is it?" she asked.

"When you left me in that devil's trap," replied the Spaniard, "I was to personate you but one night," trusting to the mask you habitually wear at the gambling-table, and to silence, to preserve my incognito."

"And I then expected to return on the following day and relieve you. But an unforeseen complication of affairs has detained me another twenty-four hours. Meanwhile, there was no need of your speaking to any one. At the gambling-table no one expects me to speak; and had not you the wit to affect anger, which would enable you to get through the day without speaking to the servants? I gave you credit for so much of resources, at least. My faith! a day of sulking would not astonish them!"

"Enough! I am satisfied of that. But how if that devil of jealousy, Senor Farley, returned?"

"Ah! he has not returned? You frighten me, truly! But, no; he has his hands full, at least until to-morrow."

"He did return, an hour ago; and what was I to do?"

"What did you do? You have betrayed me? He is lying in wait for me?"

"You need fear him no longer. Do you fancy that, having told him such a story, I should be here to advise you how he received it?"

"He would slay you in his rage. But tell me—what did you do? How have you escaped?"

"He came to me in the last agonies of death. Whatever his project, he at least had suffered the last defeat. I think he only hoped to reach you and die at your feet."

"He might have spared me so shocking an experience."

The woman shrugged her shoulders. A sigh of relief showed that she already anticipated the end. She was free from one who had come to be a constant menace to her.

"My faith! it was a trying predicament, of a verity!" heartlessly laughed the Golden Serpent.

"I sprung upon him to make sure that my stiletto ended the life so dangerous to me. Your name was on his lips. He called you his darling."

"He fell without being undeceived?"

"Yes!"

"Then the deed is fastened upon me! Who would not believe that it was not I?"

"And no one witnessed the deed?"

"Tom Cosgrove, your too servile jackal, whose loyalty I doubt, was an eye-witness."

"And he too suspected nothing?—did not discover your identity?"

"How could he?"

"Then," said the Golden Serpent, slowly, "you are safe. No one will ever suspect you; but, do you not see that this will fasten the crime upon me forever? You and I will be the only living beings who know of my innocence."

"So much the worse for you!" retorted the Spaniard, with a careless shrug. "Was it not through you that the deed was forced upon me?"

"All the same, I shall be innocent."

"If that is any consolation to you, you are at liberty to make the most of it. Doubtless it will be easier to bear the misjudgment of men, acquitted by your own conscience."

"But it will not be safe for me to return to Coyote, or indeed to remain in this part of the country. Do you know that Ham Losier will seek to avenge Farley as if he were his brother? He will hunt me to the death!"

"So much the greater reason why I should get out of these vile garments as soon as possible!"

"And so much the more reason, on my side, for allowing you to retain them."

"What are you driving at, woman?"

"Do you not understand? I refuse to take this crime upon myself!"

"And you leave it upon my shoulders?"

"Where it belongs—does it not?"

Don Giacomo, snatching at his revolver, caught sight of a slight movement of the hand of the Golden Serpent, which revealed the fact that she already had a revolver trained upon him.

"Come!" she said, vivaciously. "It will be an amusing sight for the boys to find the murderer of Adam Farley lying dead here in the road, and then to discover that it is the brave Don Giacomo in a woman's habiliments!"

"*Mil demonios!*" and the wretch paled as he quailed before the implacable Serpent.

"I fancy I see them carrying him to Coyote. Every one comes to gaze in wonder. Then some one cracks a joke, that sets his comrades off in shrieks of laughter."

"You are a devil!"

"I am a woman; therefore, I have outwitted

you, my friend. Come! shall we effect a compromise?

"Let us fly together. We will retain our respective dresses, so that if we are taken I can prove my innocence. If we escape, when we are in a place of safety you shall be released from so uncomfortable a situation."

"In all, I am to dance attendance upon your pleasure?"

"Come! I am more generous than you. You would make me the scapegoat for your terrible crime. I only ask security that justice shall be done if the worst befalls us. If we escape with life, shall I not have to rest under the odium of this deed which I never committed? Is that nothing?"

Don Giacomo sat panting with baffled rage. He could see no way but to succumb, galling as it was to his vanity. This woman had twisted him about her finger from the first. Accursed be the day when he had first yielded to her specious reasoning!

But if he must yield now, he would have revenge!—oh! he would have revenge! A day surely comes which makes all things even! He is a good hater who is a good waiter. When that day came for him! How could he requite this ignominy? He would have all the intervening time to study up something that would satisfy his hatred.

"You consent?" asked the Golden Serpent.

"Needs must when the devil drives!" quoted Don Giacomo, in Spanish.

"Turn your back to me, then."

He complied.

"Now drop your weapons on the ground."

"How! I am to go unarmed?"

"Do you think me foolish? This is an unavoidable inconvenience. You might take a notion to turn the tables on me, my friend."

"But I swear to you—"

"Oaths are breath! Drop your weapons, as I tell you!"

He yielded with a fierce muttered oath.

"Good! You will have to look to me for protection until it is safe to restore your arms to you. Now we will begin our flight together. When it is necessary for me to sleep I shall have to bind you, so that you shall be unable to play me a trick; but, believe me, I shall put you to no unnecessary inconvenience."

All day long they fled; and at night true to her word, the Golden Serpent bound her victim securely.

He had looked forward to this operation for a chance to spring upon and overpower her. But she out-generated him.

She first made him bind his own feet securely, and fasten them to the trunk of a tree. Then, while he lay upon his face, she put a noose about his neck, and tied the other end of the rope to another tree. He was thus unable to move, while she at her leisure tied his hands held behind his back.

In the morning they resumed their flight; but before the sun was two hours high they were sighted by their indefatigable pursuers.

A yell, and the race began.

"My weapons!—my weapons!" cried Giacomo.

"I fear your revenge, my friend!" said the Golden Serpent, coolly.

"*Santo Dios!* and will you leave me helpless? But, how my revenge? Could I betray you into their hands, when it must be apparent to all that I did the deed?"

"Oh, no! there is no fear of your proceeding so clumsily. But you are ill mounted."

"Therefore the greater need that I have some means of defending myself, if I am overtaken, *por Dios!*"

"But, unable to escape yourself, you might take the notion to make me a sharer in your fate. Misery loves company, you know; and I confess that I am somewhat in your debt! Or you might even be so ungenerous as to insist upon an exchange of horses!"

"Curses on you! You have been my evil genius ever since I yielded to your fatal influence! I have suspected and feared you from the first."

"And loved me a little, my Giacomo? Come! it will be your last chance for the tender confession."

And the Golden Serpent laughed.

"You are the Siren—that loathsome monster who feasted on those who had the fatuity to love her!" groaned the Spaniard.

"Look you!" cried the Golden Serpent, with sudden fierceness. "I have no cause to love men overmuch. It has been a game of wits between us. They have sought to please themselves, with little care as to the final result to me. If they occasionally find themselves caught in their own snare, have they just cause to condemn me? *Dio mio!* they are as cowardly as stupid!"

"Come, my friend! it will be unfortunate for you if you can get no greater speed out of that animal. This one is capable of much greater effort."

"How! do you threaten to abandon me, when the very horse you ride is mine?"

"I have to commend your judgment in selecting him. I shall probably owe my life to him to-day. It is to be regretted that you had to

take Adam Farley's worn-out beast in effecting your escape.

"But must I immolate myself because you are taken? What good can my company do you? Good-by. I see that those fellows are not disposed to spare horse-flesh."

And she urged her animal ahead, followed by the hoarse curses of the man she abandoned.

CHAPTER III.

A CLEVER LIAR!

"THAT infernal coward has shook her!" cried Tom Cosgrove, who was riding beside Ham Losier.

"Blast the Greaser! It's the woman we're after!" replied Ham.

"The don has got a streak o' greased lightning under him. See! he's walkin' away from us hand over fist!"

"She knocked over Ad to take up with him," said Losier, doggedly, as if that was the only point of importance.

"An' now he's shook her! By thunder! that's the Spanish of it!"

It was plain that the Golden Serpent, whom they mistook for Don Giacomo, was distancing the pursuit; but the fatigue of the horse which the miserable don indeed rode, was becoming momentarily more and more apparent.

"She's bound to git the last jump out of him," said Cosgrove. "Jest look at that! She's the devil, through an' through!"

This comment was called forth by the mad desperation with which Don Giacomo was goading his horse with whip and voice. The humiliation of being caught in women's clothes drove him frantic, even more than the fear of that ignominious death which was at worst the fate of men.

But all was vain. His horse at last sunk under him. His enemies were upon him! He was lost!

"Good Lord, boys! what's this hyar?" cried Tom Cosgrove.

"Why, it's the don in petticoats!" shouted another.

He stood at bay. The worst had come. Wondering grins greeted him on all sides.

"The don!" muttered Ham Losier, with a discontented frown.

Though no one suspected it, his hatred was a personal one. Under his pretended zeal to avenge Ad Farley, was the desire to settle an account of his own. His real purpose was to get the Golden Serpent in his power.

The wily siren, seeing that he played jackal to the better man, and that he might serve as too faithful a watch over her, had befooled him, leading him on and on until he had fatally committed himself in treachery to his superior. Then, holding over him the threat of exposure, she had molded him to her will.

That had turned his passion to that fiercest of hatred. He longed to get even with her.

"What in Cain air you doin' in this fix?" he asked, angrily.

"Why, don't you see?" cried Cosgrove. "It was him, an' not the Golden Serpent, that salted Ad Farley!"

"The deuce it was!" growled Losier, who was not so ready to see his would-be-victim slip through his fingers in this way. "Didn't you yourself say that it was the Golden Serpent?"

"Yes; an' I thought it was. Don't ye see that he's got her clothes on? Put a mask on him; an' I'll bet you couldn't tell 'em apart. By jingo! he looks like her anyway!"

But Ham Losier had unintentionally suggested to the don, a way of escape from a part of his peril.

The humiliation was inevitable; but he might yet ward off death.

"I am the victim of a most dastardly outrage!" he cried, affecting such indignation that he could hardly speak. "Accursed be the name of woman! From her first treachery in the Garden of Eden to this last infamous betrayal, she proves that she was conceived of the devil, and sent into the world to bring misery upon men!"

"Waal, shoot me ef that thar ain't good!" shouted Tom Cosgrove, roaring with laughter. "What air ye tryin to git through ye?" demanded Ham Losier.

"You see this nameless humiliation that has been put upon me?" cried Don Giacomo, gesticulating wildly. "I am made the laughing-stock of the world! And this is the work of the vilest of her sex—one of one who scarce an hour ago lay with her head on my breast, and swore that all of earth and heaven was in my arms! May all the fiends, assembled from the uttermost bounds of the infernal realm, pursue her!"

This, thickly interlarded with sounding Spanish oaths, made a very melodramatic execration. "The leetle man's riled!" declared Tom Cosgrove, nodding humorously to his companions.

The grins with which they received this satire showed Don Giacomo that so far he had hoodwinked them cleverly. They believed in the genuineness of his indignation.

Ham Losier's frowning visage alone did not relax.

"You'd better be makin' arrangements with

heaven fur yourself," he said, "than to be sendin' others down below."

"I am in your power," said the don. "But do you fancy that the fear of death weighs in comparison with this humiliation? Do you think that I remember Adam Farley's rage, when I think of the woman who has betrayed me even worse than she did him? Let him come! The worst that he can do is nothing now."

"Him come!" repeated Losier, in astonishment.

"Is it not the custom of you *Americanos* to avenge your own injuries?" asked Don Giacomo. "In such a case as this, one would say it was a strange office to delegate to a friend."

"Why, the blasted Greaser!" cried Ham Losier, who, seeing the drift of the don's words, was led, by his prejudice against the Golden Serpent, to yield a ready credence to this new view of the situation which began to dawn upon him.

"What is it?" asked Tom Cosgrove, who was slower of comprehension.

"Why, curse him! he thinks that Ad could 'a' come himself, if he'd wanted to!"

"And why not?" asked the Spaniard. "Does he care nothing for the loss—?"

"Why, blank your eyes! he's dead!"

"Dead! And how? Ah! Mother of God! you do not mean to say that Pipa is his murderess? No! no! this is too infamous! She flies from him to another. That is well. But it is needless to kill him!"

The men began to stare at one another inquiringly. All felt that they were getting at cross-purposes somehow.

"You infernal stoughtonbottle!" shouted Tom Cosgrove, angrily, "you laid him out yourself!"

"I?" cried the Spaniard, starting back aghast, and staring blankly into the faces of his accusers.

Then suddenly he threw up his hands, turning his eyes heavenward.

"Ah! *Dios santos!* I see it all!" he cried. "It is infamy blacker and blacker!"

Then he sprang upright, looking fearlessly into Ham Losier's face, and speaking in clear, ringing tones.

"Look you!" he cried. "I will not be a victim to this woman's unparalleled treason! Until now I did not guess its full measure. Listen all, and be horrified!"

"I loved her. That is true! I did not respect another man's claim! Come! how many of you are better than I in that? I begged her to fly with me. Farley was away. She would take advantage of his absence, and we should be beyond pursuit before he discovered his loss."

"With this understanding, arranged three days ago, when I was with her for an hour—"

"That's so. He was thar," admitted Tom Cosgrove.

"It is well. You hear me witness. *Gracias!*" said the Spaniard. "For two days, then, I am arranging my affairs. On the morning of yesterday she comes to me."

"Come!" she cries. 'You weary me with delay. Look you! I have taken the initiative! I have fled from the bondage that was grown too hateful to me to be endured longer. Do I go alone, or are you ready to accompany me?'"

"You lead me to heaven!" I replied. "But your horse is exhausted."

"He is such as I could get," she said. *Santisima Maria!* do you parley about horses? Have we nothing better to do? It is Adam Farley you are waiting for, then!"

"Shall I pause to reason with a woman?—above all, with a woman who has just left her home for me?"

"Come!" I said. "I am caviling while the angels hold the gate of heaven ajar for me!"

"So we set out. All day long she is angelic. She knows nothing of fatigue, although I myself am worn with rapid riding, and our horses show their exhaustion."

"I attribute her haste to a natural fear of pursuit. Her agitation is caused by nothing more terrible than the specter of an enraged husband. Ah! had I known that it was a specter indeed that haunted her!"

"At night I would have slept ready to leap into the saddle at a moment's warning. I thought it strange that she laughed at my fears, and urged the discomfort of sleeping in one's clothes."

"But in the open air, with no roof but an overhanging rock?"

"Well, was not the night insufferably hot? For the rest, here was mountain moss which would make a couch fit for a king. Finally, it was her whim. Should I wait to be persuaded? A fine gallant, truly!"

"Enough! I obeyed!"

"Finally I slept the sleep of profound exhaustion. But this was not enough. Anxiety might make me wakeful, and so defeat her purpose. She gave me hot wine. I? How should I suspect that it was drugged? So I lay at her mercy."

"I woke. What was my profound astonishment to find her full-dressed in my clothes!"

"It was a gay joke to her. *Por Dios!* it was no joke to me. I insisted upon a restoration of that attire, which became her so ill."

"She withstood me. There was an abundance for me. *Madre de Dios!* she had left me two pieces for one. Was that robbery?"

"I persuaded. I became angry. I reproached her with trifling when our very lives might be at stake."

"Come! come! she was going. If I did not dress, she would leave me to follow at my leisure."

"Of a verity, she rode off, laughing gayly."

All this Don Giacomo told with an indignation so ill in keeping with the picture he was portraying, that his auditors laughed as gayly as the Golden Serpent was said to have done.

"What could I do?" he asked. "Should I follow her bearing her clothes in my arms, myself in *dishabille*? I waited, hoping that she would return. I now know why she did not allow herself to be moved from her purpose."

"Finally, in despair, I donned these odious garments, and followed her."

"She laughed at my chagrin. There never was so famous a beauty. She would take me to a fandango, where all the señoritas should turn green with envy, playing wall-flower, while I turned the heads of all the gallants!"

"Arms? She was the gallant now. The arms went with the boots and spurs. So I was left as you see—with a fan!"

It was not literally true that Don Giacomo had a fan. He held his open hands, to show that he was disarmed.

"The devil that lurked beneath her banter is now apparent to me," he went on. "If gay badinage failed to reconcile me to my humiliation, I have no doubt that she would have coerced me with my own weapons. It is plain that she had resolved to fasten this crime upon me, if we were overtaken."

"To the same end she rode my horse, leaving me this exhausted beast. Her heartless desertion proves how she had schemed from the first."

"She has sacrificed me to her own safety. She has brought this shame upon me. Therefore I curse her with every breath!"

"An' I say—an' I've *always* said it!—she's a chain-lightnin' leetle woman!" cried one of the men who, while the mood was upon him, would have been among the foremost to hang her, had they caught her.

As it was, the huge joke of putting this dandy into her dress, to his ludicrous disgust, went far to atone for the trifling faults of killing one man and trying to fasten the crime upon another, both of whom she had professed to love.

As for the peccadillo of running off with another man's property—if it had been a horse, that would have been a hanging matter; but a woman!—the boys looked upon that as an entirely personal affair, which would justify the injured man in shooting his wronger on sight, but with which the public at large had no cause to interfere.

"But, by Judas! we can't lose the chance of parading this new specimen through Coyote!" cried Tom Cosgrove. "The boys would never forgive us, if we kept such a windfall to ourselves."

Everybody laughed. In vain did Don Giacomo plead. He swore that he would commit suicide.

"Not until we're through with ye!" said Cosgrove. "If, after we've had our fun, you want to rid the world of one Greaser more, that's your own affair."

"But," interposed Ham Losier, seeing that the whole party was about to turn about at once and return to Coyote, "we are not to abandon our enterprise. We set out to avenge Ad Farley's death; and the murderess is not yet in our hands. All this while she has been increasing her advantage."

But the boys had laughed themselves into good humor. They wanted the fun of parading the dandy don through the camp.

"Hang it all, Ham!" said one, "we can't never pick her up. She's straddlin' the best hoss in this part o' the country!"

"At any rate, it will take a long chase to make anything of this," said Tom Cosgrove, "and we ain't ready for it. We can make a fresh start to-morrow with better horses, and be the gainers by it. That will give us a chance for our fun in the bargain."

Losier saw that his party was completely demoralized. He yielded.

They rode back to Coyote. Tom Cosgrove took the don's tethering-strap, and dashed through the camp at breakneck speed, followed by all the others, yelling at the top of their lungs.

At first it was supposed that they had returned with the Golden Serpent. But with his mask off many recognized Don Giacomo, and when the nature of the joke became generally known, the whole camp entered into the sport.

Never was man so guyed before. What the boys didn't think of in the way of chaff would make a precious small book.

The women took Don Giacomo's part. It was a shame to abuse him so!

As for him, he that day steeped his soul in hatred of the accursed *Americanos* so that he never afterward could see one without gritting his teeth.

But it was to wreaking a fit revenge against

the Golden Serpent that he dedicated his life, with many a rasping Spanish oath.

The boys wound up by ducking him in the creek until he was nearly drowned, and then drummed him out of camp.

Ham Losier organized his party afresh, and set out once more on the trail of the Golden Serpent.

A week later they returned empty-handed. But they had accomplished one result not anticipated. Their persistent pursuit had driven the Golden Serpent to a desperate step.

A slip, a fall, and a horse with a broken leg, arrested her flight.

In this strait she accidentally made a discovery which altered the whole plan of her life.

"Hunted like a wild beast," she said. "I must surround myself with men who will match Ham Losier's gang, and here is the means of securing them!"

On the day following the formation of this new purpose she stood in the midst of a party of men, as sad dogs as ever went unchanged.

"You have been deceived," she said, "by a man who used you only so long as you were necessary to his purpose, and then slipped away with the prize for which some of you had paid with your blood. You long for revenge? Well, I can lead you to his hiding-place."

"On my side, I have a fancy to queen it over a band of road-agents. You can gratify that ambition."

"You know something of me already. Judge from that whether I am fit to lead desperate men on desperate enterprises."

"Come! is it a bargain?"

The men gazed at her with awakening enthusiasm. The idea of being led by a woman, and she of such wild beauty, caught their fancy.

Once organized, the fame of such a band would spread like wild-fire, because of its romantic leadership.

"What say, boys? Is it a go?" cried one of their number.

He swung his hat above his head, and a wild cheer answered him.

They swore allegiance to their fair queen at the mouth of the revolver and the point of the bowie-knife, and her first act was to lead them to a shanty where they found a man lying bound and just recovering consciousness after a stunning blow.

Search of his person failed to discover the prize which they had hoped to regain, and knowing that he had no prospect other than death, he refused to tell what had brought him to the state in which they found him.

In a rage they hanged him out of hand.

With the adventures that immediately followed this new phase in the checkered life of the Golden Serpent, this story is not concerned. Suffice it to say that six months subsequent found her at the head of one of the most famous bands of robbers in the West.

During this interval she had neither seen nor heard of Don Giacomo, the victim of so base treachery.

But now her line of life crossed once more that of Tiger Dick; and at this point we resume the narrative.

CHAPTER IV.

A TROPIC PARADISE.

DIMPLED by a gentle southern breeze, the blue waters of the Gulf of California flashed back the full-orbed splendor of the tropic sun, as if from the silver surface of scale armor.

They were cleft by the sharp prow of a small, felucca-rigged craft, which was standing off and on to weather a long low point of land, where rose the columnar stems and waved the broad leaves of the luxuriant vegetation of that southern clime.

The vessel was of most graceful build, and gayly decked with bunting; while a striped awning protected a part of its deck from the too fervid rays of the vertical sun.

It was manned by dark-skinned natives, dressed in loose tunics and flowing trousers of snowy duck, and with gaudy silk handkerchiefs bound artistically about their raven locks. Each carried a murderous-looking knife on his hip, which one was apt to associate uncomfortably with the glitter of his black eyes.

But under the awning was a reassuring picture.

There swung a silken hammock in which reclined a lady of most alluring beauty. She had the fair skin of the north, and the mild-eyed serenity of that zone where passion is calmed into an idealistic tenderness. There was an air of almost ethereal fragility about her, which with some women makes a period of convalescence the most bewitching of all.

Beside her, in a canvas reclining chair, sat a gentleman, in the heyday of physical manhood, yet whose clear-cut features bore the lines of one old in worldly experience. Between his knees leaned neglected a Spanish lute; with one hand he was toying idly with the fringe of a zephyry shawl which trailed over the side of the hammock on the holy-stoned deck; his absent gaze was fixed on the far horizon, where a faint line divided the blue of the sea from the blue of the sky.

"Why so grave, my gentle Giaour?" asked

the lady, with a vein of pathos in her playfulness.

Her companion came out of his reverie with a start.

"Am I grave?" he asked, smiling upon her with a tenderness more expressive than words, yet with the effort showing but too plainly through his assumed cheerfulness.

She reached out her soft white hand, and let it fall upon his as lightly as a rose-leaf.

The affectionate yearning in her eyes drew him to her; and he leaned nearer, until she could put out her other hand and brush a stray lock back from his forehead.

Still she smiled bravely into his eyes, as she asked:

"Can't I woo you from those Byronic moods, dear? They're not becoming to your style of beauty!"

"I'm an ungrateful wretch!" affirmed the man, in tones deep and tremulous with emotion.

"Hush! hush!" she interrupted him. "I'll listen to no such treasonable statement. Do you see that little bay, with the swells combing on its narrow strip of yellow sand, with its cool, shadowy retreats, its restful silences, the music of its birds, the perfume of its flowers?"

The man looked in the direction in which, rising upon her elbow, she pointed with outstretched hand.

He saw a perfect Paradise of tropic delights—the smiling sea, in the embrace, as it were, of the land, decked as a bride for her nuptials; and over all, the benign heavens.

"My lover! my husband soon to be!" breathed the lady, in low, winning tones, "we are sailing away to just such a haven of peace!"

He turned and looked at her.

An exquisite shell-tint had come into her cheeks, its play as sensitive as the changing light of the aurora. Her eyes were humid with tenderness; and her lips, just parted with a questioning smile, awaited the reward of their pretty prognostic.

The man's grave face did not relax. Instead into his eyes came a brooding trouble, as he read what her soul was telling him of its complete abandonment, its entire dependence upon him.

Slowly, in spite of her brave struggle to retain it, the smile faded from her lips, leaving a piteous quiver there. Her cheeks paled; her eyes grew fearful; and with her hands palm to palm and her shoulders drawn forward, she shrunk into his embrace, as if for protection.

"Ben, dear Ben!" she breathed, "what is it? I have been so happy—oh! I can't tell you! But of late—I don't know what it is—you are breaking my heart! I'm afraid! It seems as if something terrible were impending! You—you are keeping me out of your heart!"

"Beatrice," said the man slowly, looking steadily down into the eyes that besought his, "suppose that every day brought nearer the necessity of parting with you?"

"Of parting with me!" gasped the woman, in amazement.

"For a little while," he hastened to add.

"But when, and why? I thought that we were one forever—that we should never be separated again—never for a moment!"

"It is unavoidable, dear."

"But—but—as your wife, shall I not go where you go, always?"

"I must set out to-morrow—"

"To-morrow! Before—before—"

She had started from his embrace. She now read his face with a wild misgiving.

"On business which of necessity anticipates our marriage," he went on, too deeply engrossed in his own thoughts to observe closely what was going on in her mind.

"But of what nature? You can tell me—"

"Not now."

"Nor how long—"

Everything seemed swimming about her; the words died on her lips.

"I do not know," he answered, disengaging a trifling snarl in the fringe of her shawl.

Why did he avoid looking at her? Why had he hidden this from her till the last moment? A mad thought flashed through her brain like a glare of lightning that suddenly brings out in vivid detail a scene of devastation.

"Ben, you—are—not—"

She leaned toward him involuntarily, as if to meet the blow. Let her be close to him when it fell! It seemed as if she were indeed dying!

There was that in her constrained voice—which abruptly brought him to himself and the present, and lifting his eyes quickly he saw what he had unwittingly done.

"Beatrice!" he cried, in quick, sharp, startled tones, as he caught her in his arms.

"O-o-oh!"

And with a long-drawn cry, as the burden of that maddening doubt fell away from her heart, she threw one arm about his neck, and clung to him, sobbing spasmodically.

"Oh! what have I done?" he cried, caressing her hair, and kissing her eyes and cheeks and lips. "My darling! my poor darling!"

"Hold me close," she whispered, "and tell me over and over and over again!"

"But what shall I tell you, my love?" he asked, in bewilderment. "Has the thought of—a brief separation overcome you so?"

"Oh! you don't know how wicked I have been!" she said, laughing hysterically through her fast-falling tears. "There never was such treason!"

"What treason?"

"I'm afraid, and ashamed too, to tell you! Only I want you to drive it out of my heart, so far that it can never, never return!"

"Tell me freely."

She put her hand before his eyes so that he should not look at her, and with her lips close to his ear she whispered, so low and hesitatingly that the words would have been intelligible to none but a lover's sense:

"Say—that you leave—your—heart—behind you, and I'll not ask what takes you away!"

"Beatrice!" he cried, in a passionate protest, trying to get a glimpse of her face.

"No! no! you shall not look!" she cried, holding his eyes more closely, and burying her face deeper in his neck. "But, say it! say it!"

The man remained silent for a moment, in which he seemed to gather all the forces of his great love; while the woman waited with bated breath.

Then in a deep, calm voice, he said, deliberately:

"Beatrice, whatever shall happen in our two lives, never for a moment doubt that you, and you alone, have stirred the profoundest depths of my nature; believe, now and ever, that from the time I first saw you, the possession of your love, of *you*, has been, and ever will be, to the last moment of my conscious existence, the one craving of my heart!"

The girl threw back her head, her face irradiated with unclouded ecstasy.

"I believe you!" she cried. "Nothing can ever shake my faith again. But—but, while I am about it, may I make a full confession?"

She suddenly became shamefaced again, though she laughed as she looked shyly into his face.

"Tell me all," he said.

"Well, then"—her voice sinking lower and lower—"sometimes I have wondered— Oh, I *can't* tell you!"

"Now, then!"

And he threw one corner of her shawl over her head, so as to hide her crimson cheek, though the other burned against his neck like fire.

"I have wondered!" she breathed, "that you should be willing to wait—here it is almost six months! Because, if it was only that I should regain my strength, you have never expressed any impatience, you know, that I recovered so slowly!"

The man smiled in spite of himself at this almost child-like naive confession. The woman unaviled her heart to him, showing him the intensity of its craving for the full measure of love.

"If your health had been the only consideration," he said, "you should have found me as impatient a suitor as the most exacting love could desire."

"And you have wanted me all along?"

"I have set down each day that has kept us apart, as a day of happiness lost forever!"

"I am satisfied. I shall not importune you for your reasons. I am content to wait my lord's good pleasure!"

"You shall know all in due time."

So they sailed on over the peaceful sea, the woman the happier for this explanation, but the man's heart secretly crushed beneath the weight of an augmented burden.

And was he so necessary to her? God shield her, if the worst came? Why had he ever crossed her path, to darken it with the shadow of his accursed life?

In a little cove the yacht cast anchor, as the sun touched the western horizon. Then like a new Paul and Virginia they strolled under the canopy of tropical frondage, until they came to a low whitewashed structure which harmonized well with its silvan surroundings.

On a bench before the cot an old gentleman was dozing. He had just narrowly escaped dislocating his neck by a more pronounced lurch than usual, when the sound of their approaching footsteps aroused him to full consciousness.

CHAPTER V.

A PLEDGE REDEEMED.

"WHY, bless my soul and body!" exclaimed the old gentleman, readjusting his wig, and rubbing his eyes vigorously. "It is fairly sun-down! And are you truants just returning? What do you fancy an old fellow like me finds to amuse himself with, alone the live-long day?"

"Oh, you dear old guardie!" cried Beatrice, not without genuine compunctions. "We do neglect you shamefully! But really we have not been gone three hours. And you shall have no reason to complain in the future—not in the immediate future, at any rate!"

Not yet over the excitement of her recent interview, she ran up to the old gentleman, and throwing her arms about his neck, kissed him effusively on either cheek.

"Eh? eh?" he laughed. "I'm fond of affection, I am; but really, my dear, you must leave me my wig! Langley, you see what you have before you. Take warning!"

But a tear fell upon his cheek; and before he could put his ward at arm's-length and demand its meaning, she slipped from his grasp and fled into the house.

"Tears?" he exclaimed, looking at the younger man inquiringly.

"Will you stroll with me a few minutes?" asked the latter.

"Stroll with you? Certainly! certainly!"

They walked away from the cot in silence, the elder man casting furtive glances of increasing anxiety at the younger.

At a sufficient distance to be out of sight and hearing, the latter stopped, and leaning his back against a tree, stood with folded arms looking gloomily into vacancy.

"Mr. Brinton," he said, "you know me as the noted outlaw, Tiger Dick, *alias* Black-Hoss Ben, a man whose past life is stained with crime the full extent of which you may never know. You have under your tutelage a woman of spotless life and character. Yet you have sanctioned the union of those two beings, so diametrically opposed to each other!"

"In the first place," said old Joel Brinton, "I have lived long enough in this strange world of ours to learn that the life is not always the measure of the man. In the second place it was enough for me that you seemed necessary to the happiness—to the very *life* of my old friend's child, who is as dear to me as if she were my own, and that you have treated her in a manner which will, I believe, if continued, secure her happiness in spite of all the past."

"Thank you, sir!" said Tiger Dick, with emotion. "I believe that I merit something of your implied encomium. If a profound aspiration to retrieve the past by an unblemished future is worthy of the encouragement of good men, then I have some claim upon the sympathy of my kind. If the entire dedication of one life to another is any guaranty, then you are safe in intrusting the happiness of your ward to me."

"But, sir, we cannot put the past behind us at will. There are oftentimes phantom hands reaching out of it that clasp us like bands of steel! That is the retribution now to be exacted of me!"

"I go to-morrow to give myself into the hands of the law, to be tried for murder!"

"What?" cried old Joel Brinton, in dismay.

"I go to-morrow to give myself into the hands of the law, to be tried for murder!" repeated Tiger Dick, distinctly, deliberately.

"But I do not understand you!" cried the old gentleman. "You are free. You— Oh! I see!" he continued, suddenly interrupting himself. "Being under this cloud, you prefer to clear yourself before linking your fate to that of our dear Beatrice. Mr. Langley, you confirm my growing good opinion of you. I have taken your hand in the past, mainly, I confess, for my ward's sake. I now ask it for your own."

"Wait, sir! You are laboring under a misapprehension. Of the crime laid to my charge I am fully guilty. I have every reason to believe that I shall be convicted and hanged by the neck until I am dead!"

The old man stood aghast.

"But, sir," he said, presently, "I cannot understand your motives. As I began to say, a moment since, you are a free man. You have no accuser here. Do you mean to say that you voluntarily go to certain death? I have heard of repentance taking a fanatical turn, but I confess that such an extreme of conscientiousness is new to my experience."

"When, six months ago, I parted with Jim Farnsworth, the 'Frisco sheriff, who for two years has hunted me between the two oceans, I did so under the contract that if he would leave me undisturbed for six months I would, at the expiration of that period if not sooner, give myself up for trial. He has kept his pledge; I now go to redeem mine."

"And so, sir," said old Joel Brinton, not without a certain wondering respect for this Spartan-like integrity, yet with a growing indignation, "to secure six months' association with my ward free from anxiety, you gave your chance of final escape? Jim Farnsworth was wounded and helpless. He was in your power instead of you being in his. If you had eluded him for two years, your chance of continuing to do so was as good as before—though, of course, you could not have asked a woman to share your fugitive state. But, sir, is that a specimen of your exalted devotion, to secure this respite of selfish enjoyment to yourself, regardless of the after-consequences to her?"

"You are doing me an injustice. You know that she, too, was at the point of death, apparently, having saved my life at the hazard of her own. You know, too, the strength of her love for me. Thank God, nothing can ever deprive me of that knowledge! What would have been the result if I had torn myself away from her? You have seen the precarious tenure of her life during these anxious months, even with our greatest solicitude. Do you believe that she would have recovered if she had come here with a broken heart?"

"No!—frankly, I do not!"

"Well, then, for this one chance of life for her, I agreed to put myself in the prisoner's dock in 'Frisco, where Jim Farnsworth would

never have got me. And *that* is a specimen of my disinterested devotion!"

"My dear sir!" cried old Joel Brinton, impulsively extending his hand, which this time was not refused, "I *have* wronged you! But have you told her this?"

"Can you ask such a question? Did she look as if I had? I told her that I was forced to leave her on business. It was not an easy matter to do that without assigning any reason."

"But what will become of her if you are—are— I beg your pardon!"

"Hanged? I do not know. She will be stronger physically. I look to you to soften the blow, if it fall. Remember, there is always the chance that I may escape; and then I can return to her a free man. My God! it makes my head whirl to think of *that* chance! But I shall never return unless I am free to walk openly before all men. Better that she die and be at rest, than drag out a hunted existence, trembling at the face of every stranger. If the worst come, you will keep it from her until all is over. The irrevocability of death lifts the crushing burden after the blow has fallen, and she may recover. At the worst, the thought that I died for love of her will be easier to bear than the knowledge that I had deserted her to save my worthless life!"

We pass over the painful parting of the morrow. Tiger Dick made it a point of loyalty that Beatrice should not indulge a grief that would impair the health in which he had so vital an interest; and with her lips to his she pledged herself to strive to think only of the golden day of their reunion, never, never to part more this side the grave!

Six months to a day from the date of his pledge, Tiger Dick stood in the presence of Jim Farnsworth and said:

"I am here! Do with me as you will!"

"By Jove, Dick!" cried the sheriff, as he grasped his hand. "I never before hated anything so in all my life! I know that this isn't exactly what I promised the boys. I haven't bagged you fairly; and, I swear! I wouldn't have made such an agreement but for that woman! I've been thinking the matter over; and I made up my mind that if you failed to come to time, I'd drop it. But now that you're here, I suppose I'll have to run you in."

"Did you fear that I would fail?" asked Dick, proudly.

"No, Dick! Honor bright, I didn't think it was in you!" said the sheriff.

That night Tiger Dick sat reflecting in a prison cell.

Outside those stone walls the newsboys shouted the strange intelligence of a man who had redeemed his word at the cost of his liberty, with the prospect of a hangman's noose in the not distant future!

The Western metropolis was electrified. Had we gone back to feudal times, when bold robbers held their honor before their lives?

Then the ubiquitous and irrepressible reporter unearthed the romantic features of the matter. There was a woman in the case!

Every fair San Franciscan under thirty—and some over the divide!—pored over the details of the graphic narrative, and fell in love with this darling outlaw!

They put their pretty heads together and laid out regular campaigns, for the ensuing twelve months or so, which would intervene before he paid the penalty of his interesting crimes.

The romantic would inundate him with flowers and slippers, while the pious devoted themselves to his conversion. Oh, yes! such a dear fellow must be saved!

Meanwhile the news spread. It was talked of in out-of-the way mining-camps. It woke the admiration of rough fellows whose sentiment of hero-worship caught at just such melodramatic virtues, to the neglect, unhappily, of everyday truthfulness and honesty and sobriety.

So it came to the ears of the Golden Serpent, and thrilled down through the depths of her volcanic nature like a bolt of lightning!

"Tiger Dick—Senor Hameeltonn!—with his neck in the hangman's noose! *Madre de Dios!* it cannot—it *shall* not be!"

CHAPTER VI.

A SUSCEPTIBLE WARDEN.

THE Prison Warden at San Francisco sat with his heels on his desk, his hat on the back of his head, and his body hidden by the broad sheet of the *Chronicle*, absorbed in a leader on the political situation.

A knock found him considering the bearings of the Chinese question on the coming election.

"Come in," he called out, going on with his reading.

The door opened, and heavily-booted feet crossed the threshold.

"Well?" demanded the warden from behind his rampart.

"A lady to see No. 29."

Down came the newspaper, and Dan Ford's keen glance was leveled at the applicant.

The attendant had stepped aside to admit a lady of small stature, dressed in mourning, and with her face hidden by a crape veil.

One glance at the elegant attire, which hid full

justice to the symmetry of figure, and Dan Ford's feet dropped from the desk, his hat came off, his newspaper was laid aside, and he stood placing a chair and bowing with the grace of a dancing-master.

"Beg pardon, madam! Pray be seated," he said.

"Gracias, señor," replied the lady, in tones of liquid music.

And with a gliding motion peculiar to the Spanish-Mexican she accepted his courtesy.

"Hem!" coughed Dan, behind his hand. "To—ah—see No. 29?"

"Senor Hameeltonn, if you please."

"Eh? I beg your pardon."

"He is known to you as Tigair Deek!"

"Ah—exactly! But—ah—you are aware, madam, that he is held under a capital charge?"

"Ah Dios!"

And the lady lifted her hands slightly with a deprecating gesture.

"And that therefore greater care is taken in admitting visitors to his cell?"

"But, the credentials, señor?"

"If you represent one of the churches—"

A quick, almost impatient, shrug of the shoulders repudiated this assumption.

"I represent only humanity."

"Or have the indorsement of any well-known citizen?"

"Alas! I know no one."

"His relatives, of course—"

"No, no, señor!" was the low—it seemed sad—dissent.

Dan Ford frowned and passed his hand down his face, as is embarrassed by the duties of his office.

"But, señor!" cried the lady, with a sudden impassioned outburst, "is there no place for his friends?—those upon whom this unheard-of act of self-immolation has fallen as an irreparable calamity?"

And sweeping aside her veil, she leaned forward in her chair in the earnestness of her appeal.

Dan Ford fairly caught his breath. Never before had such sloe-black eyes bent their melting gaze upon him. There was an exquisite purity about the mouth, with its tremulous lips apart; and through the olive of the rounded cheeks glowed the warm tropical blood!

There is a certain discretionary power which I will be glad to extend to your case!" he said, with a low bow.

"Ah! Señor is too kind!"

He might have handed her over to the waiting turnkey, and gone on with his reading. Instead, he said to the attendant:

"Go to Twenty-nine, and say that a lady will call upon him presently."

So he had her to himself for a moment; and while he apologized for the precautions necessary to prison discipline, he made the most of her beauty and the music of her voice.

"If madam will please to follow me," he said, rising, when he could no longer in all conscience detain her.

"Gracias!" she murmured, and rose with the flowing, sinuous motion that is seen nowhere beyond the tropics.

"Confound him!" muttered Dan Ford, enviously. "Hang me if I don't wish I was in his shoes! I'd take his chances, with this screamer thrown in!"

He wanted to see their meeting. Would she throw herself into his arms? These Spanish women were so delightfully demonstrative!

"It can't be the beauty for whose sake he made such a queer dicker with Farnsworth, either. Jim said she was a Yank. Blank his eyes! he's got more than his share!"

He threw open the cell door.

Tiger Dick stood waiting expectantly.

"A lady to see you," said the warden.

The prisoner acknowledged his service with a nod, and then bowed more deeply to his visitor, with the questioning look on his face unaltered.

As the lady passed him, Dan Ford glanced down at her, and saw that she had dropped her veil before her face.

"Sold!" he muttered to himself, and closed the cell door between her and himself.

She turned with a quick start, as the bolts shot into place. A little gasping cry escaped her lips.

"She just realizes what it is to be locked up," reflected Dan. "It goes to her heart to have her lover behind the bars."

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and strode back to his office with a discontented frown.

CHAPTER VII.

AN AWKWARD INTERVIEW.

MEANWHILE the lady had turned again toward Tiger Dick, and stood regarding him in silence through her veil.

"I beg that you will accept this stool, the best I have to offer you," he said, politely.

Instead of seating herself at once, she gazed about the cell. She shuddered at its blank walls; but her eyes rested at last on a bouquet which graced a small shelf, flanked by a Bible.

She compressed her lips, her nostrils dilated, and her eyes flashed, at sight of the flowers.

She swept aside her veil, and revealed only

pleading deprecation and humility in the place of that flitting shadow of jealousy.

"It is I!" she said, and awaited his reception as if she were a culprit and he her judge.

"Why are you here?" asked Tiger Dick, coldly.

Was her beauty impotent to relax his frown of displeasure?

Her head sagged a little on one side. A tear started in her eye, hung tremulously on her long lashes, and then trickled down her now pale cheek.

"Santa Maria! can you ask?" she sighed.

"I know of no reason to expect such kindness," said the Tiger, with a faint sneer of sarcasm.

"Is it not evident that I come for love of you?" asked the suppliant.

Tiger Dick dropped his eyes to the floor of his cell. He had no reply for so unreserved a confession.

"Senor Hameeltonn!" breathed the lady, with a cadence of tenderness that should have moved the heart of an anchorite.

With an impatient wave of his hand, Tiger Dick said:

"Enough of this, madam! You will pardon my frankness; but we might as well understand each other once for all."

"You will be gentle with me? And—and—if I might sit—"

"Accept my apology for not having insisted!"

She sunk into the seat, and dropped her face into her hands.

Tiger Dick frowned and fidgeted. These women turn the point of our brutality by baring their bosoms to the blow.

But he thought of Beatrice—her so free from these tricks of coquetry.

What right had this creature to thrust her odious passion between him and his pure love?

Still, she was a woman; and it was an amiable fault to love him according to her nature. So he left unsaid the harsh speech that had risen to his lips.

"Why are you here? I ask again," he substituted.

"To save you!" she replied. "Listen! I have money; and with money anything can be done."

"No one needs to be told that the Golden Serpent—"

"Hush! hush! Would you betray me? Is this the place to utter that name?"

"I beg your pardon!"

"Did you fancy that I came with letters of introduction to these people? Would it not make the fortune of some listening turnkey?"

"Once more I beg your pardon. But you are running a useless risk."

"Useless?—with hope of saving you from your strange infatuation!"

"I cannot be saved, as you express it, in that way?"

"What! You refuse to be my debtor? *Madre de Dios!* when I would pour out my blood for you as freely as a mother would nourish her child! And you refuse! It is worse than death that you hate me! *Ah Dios!*"

"You are strangely blind," said the Tiger, impatiently. "Is it not plain to you that I would not have given myself up if I had been willing to escape again by strategy?"

"But you redeemed your pledge to Senor Farnsworth. It was that you should give yourself up; not that you should remain a prisoner, if the chance of escape were offered you. Are you under obligation to the authorities here? It is for them to look out that you do not outwit them."

"Enough!" replied Dick, annoyed at her very clear-sightedness. "When I leave this place, I shall go to the gallows, or to perfect freedom before all men."

"Is it then that you hope to establish your innocence?"

"No. To you I confess my guilt. I have no hope but the ordinary uncertainties of the law."

"But this is madness! If you were an unmitigated rogue, the chances would be favorable enough for your escape through the imbecility of some jury; for one cannot take twelve men at random without getting one or more fools. But one so noble—one capable of such unparalleled integrity to his plighted word—my faith! it goes without saying that your fate would be sealed, innocent or guilty!"

"Nevertheless I am resolved," replied the Tiger.

"Has life then lost all charm to you, that you seek suicide thus?"

"I shall never return to the old life. If I begin again, it must be with my past record of crime obliterated, so that I dare look any man in the face!"

"Ah Dios!"

The woman sat helpless before this unlooked-for resistance.

For a long time she was mute. The Tiger left her in her dilemma, heartily wishing that she would leave him.

Suddenly she started to her feet, so powerfully was she affected by a new thought.

"What say you?" she cried. "If you are acquitted, you will accept your freedom?"

"Why not?" he asked. "I am not in love with death."

"One would think so. But let that pass. You leave me some hope. Money, as I have said, will do anything. You shall be acquitted, if it takes all the gold in the State of California; and if that is not enough, there is more beyond its borders."

"You do not understand me. I am done with crime in all its forms. I refuse to profit by bribery. I will frustrate any attempt on your part to tamper with the jury, by warning the attorney for the State, and my own also."

"*Santissima Virgen!*" cried the Golden Serpent, with a sudden burst of fierce anger. "It is I that you spurn from you! Anything coming from my hand is contaminated! What have I done to you, that you should so scorn my love? Do I ask for a return? Will it poison your life, to remember that a woman laid her hair under your feet, that you might walk over it to safety?"

"I have told you that it is crime that I refuse to benefit by," repeated the Tiger, coldly.

"If freedom were offered you honorably, yet through my instrumentality, would you accept it?"

The Tiger frowned and tapped the floor impatiently with his boot.

She had him cornered. Without looking up, he could feel the glow of her great eyes fastened upon him.

Why did he lack the courage to tell her frankly, that the most acceptable office she could perform for him would be to concern herself no further with his affairs? It was such a simple thing, and yet—and yet—well, she was a woman! That made all the difference.

"Come!" she cried. "You have said it was the crime. Do you affirm the implication, that it is not the hand that offers you freedom?"

"All this is to no purpose," said the Tiger, evasively. "Since nothing can be done but to leave matters to take their course, what is the use of discussing a purely hypothetical case?"

"If it were true, you might grant me this little crumb of comfort," said the woman, with gentle reproach in her sad voice.

"Well, then, have it so!" said the Tiger, with ill grace enough in all conscience. "If an honorable release were to come to me through your means, I should accept and thank you for it."

"Ah Dios!"

And with a cry of delight, the impulsive creature cast herself on her knees at his feet, and threw her arms about him.

He withdrew her arms resolutely, yet as gently as might be, and put her away from him.

Denied the poor privilege of pressing him to her heart, she fell kissing his hands—the hands that repelled her!

What could he do with so mad a creature?

He thought of Beatrice; and his cheeks flamed scarlet. This seemed like treachery in some sort to her—and he so loyal; he without a thought that was not wrapped up in her!

Yet, once more, what could he do with this embodiment of self-abandoning passion? A man he might have hurled from him without scruple. But a woman? He could not rebuff her with the same kind of violence—always remembering that it was her love he was putting away from him.

"Stop!" he said, striving to keep harshness as much as might be out of the firmness of his tone. "Whatever your feelings, they must find no further expression of this sort."

"It is enough!" cried the woman, with her eyes a gleam. "You who stand by your word even unto death—you cannot repudiate this promise when its fulfillment is demanded of you!"

Tiger Dick remained silent. He was half afraid that she would find some means of effecting his release. And then how could he go to Beatrice, and offer her the life which he owed to her irrepressible rival?

Here was the most exasperating complication of his life.

There was one chance in—well, it was impossible to say how many, that he might slip through the meshes of the net of the law, and here was this woman ready to snap at it and rob him of that one poor chance for real freedom!

"Wait!" she cried, with a ring of triumph in her voice. "When your jailers open the door and say, 'Go! you are free! I ask but one thing of you. Say in your heart, with pity, if not some little throb of tenderness: 'Poor little thing! she loved me!—whatever her faults, she loved me! Say that! say that!'"

Tears were streaming down her face, yet with her hands pressed upon her bosom she gazed at him with a smile of unspeakable devotion.

Suddenly she dropped her face into her hands, and stood with bowed head, shaken by a storm of sobs.

Tiger Dick was human, and nothing in the form of man could have looked upon this picture unmoved.

He put his hand kindly on her shoulder, and dropping his voice to a tone of gentle commiseration, said:

"Pipa, this may be the last time we shall ever exchange words. Let us part, then, with as

kindly feelings as possible. If it will contribute anything to that end, I will say that I shall look upon our past association with more of regret than—than— Pardon me!"

The word "annoyance" was at the tip of his tongue; but he found it impossible to express his thought.

The woman stood perfectly still while he was speaking. She fairly held her breath.

"See!" she said, when at last he removed his hand from her shoulder. "I dared not stir, lest I cause you to take your hand away sooner than your heart would otherwise prompt. It is the kindness of your touch, the gentleness of your voice, that will live in my memory. Let me do nothing, say nothing, to change your mood. And yet, may I ask one boon of you? Say—I forgive you for loving me over-much!"

"Stay!" she cried, before he could reply. "If you can speak as tenderly as you did but now, then say it; if not, remain silent! I would not have you mar this one dear memory!"

"It is impossible to say just what you ask me to," he replied, in a tone of gentle indulgence. "Then say only—I forgive you!"

She waited with her hands clasped, and her eyes fixed upon his beseechingly.

It was the hardest task of his life. The words stuck in his throat. He was crimson to the temples. Yet he repeated the words after her. "I forgive you!"

With a murmuring cry she dropped her face into her hands, and stood for a moment as if overcome by a surge of emotion.

Tiger Dick stood feeling like a bashful school-boy.

Presently she turned and groped for the cell door.

"Please signify to the turnkey, if you can, senor, that I am ready to go forth," she said, in a tone altogether different from any she had hitherto used.

The Tiger executed her request; and without looking at him again, she passed out of his presence.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HON. MRS. BENONI SPIKE.

It is now necessary to interweave another thread of our drama.

"Benoni Spike!"

The summons was as crisp as pie-crust.

"Huldy?"

The response was "as meek as Moses."

"I swan to man, if you wouldn't try the patience of a saint!"

"I try to please ye, Huldy."

"You try to please me! Oh! you *do*? Ha! ha! ha! I guess all the tryin' you ever do won't take no flesh off your bones. If I'd 'a' known I was marryin' of a sack o' bran when I took up with you, Benoni Spike, I'd—I'd— Well, no matter. It's past prayin' for now."

The woman's mirthless laugh showed that she was almost hysterical with impatience.

The man sat with his knees close together, his shoulders bowed, his head drooping, industriously picking a shred of lint from his trousers.

The corners of his mouth were drawn down, his eyebrows elevated, the picture of hen-pecked long-suffering.

He ventured no expostulation at his wife's flattering criticism.

This tame submission exasperated her.

"Consarn ye!—if I *must* say such a thing," she cried, "why don't ye wake up?"

And she stamped her foot with an emphasis that made him fairly jump.

"Huldy!" he protested, looking at her with almost supplicating reproach.

"Don't Huldy me!" cried the irate spouse. "I'm clean sick an' tired of your sawney shiffliness. I vum! if it took me a month o' Sundays to set one foot before another, as it does you, I'd—I'd—"

But at a loss for a suitable recourse in so preposterous a contingency, she strode across the room, panting, almost snorting, with anger.

She was a woman of large frame, of that angularity of figure not infrequently produced in New England. Her features were masculine, the nose fairly Roman, the jaw protruding—indicative of determination—the lips thin and forming a straight line, the eyes small and of that keenness which is sometimes compared to a gimlet.

Her hair was brushed uncompromisingly straight over her temples, and wound in a knot behind, surmounted by a high back comb.

She was dressed in black silk, of a decidedly Puritanical cut, yet with an evident purpose of giving an imposing effect.

Her husband was a little man, who looked as if, from long habit of getting into the smallest possible compass, he had gradually shrunk into the meek, inoffensive nobody he was.

He wore black broadcloth, of his wife's choosing, in which he seemed exceedingly uncomfortable.

Presently the lady stopped before him, and looking as if she felt inclined to shake him like an unruly boy, demanded.

"Benoni Spike, air you a member o' the Californy Legislatur', or ain't ye?"

"Of course I am a member of the Legislature, Huldy," he replied, dutifully.

"The Honorable Benoni Spike!" she cried, sarcastically. "Ha! ha! ha! That would made a horse laugh—that would!—to look at ye as ye set."

"It was your wantin', Huldy."

"My wantin'? That is to say, it wa'n't yourn."

"I wouldn't 'a' got the office but for you!"

"You git the office—you! Well, that's what I call good! Not till the cows come home! One would have to possess one's soul in patience, if one waited on your motions!"

The Honorable Benoni Spike accepted this scornful characterization without a murmur.

"Yes, siree!" declared his wife, roundly. "I put ye in that seat, jest as I have made ye in everythin', ever since I took a mighty unpromisin' job on my hands."

Then gathering herself for an "annihilator," she demanded:

"And what did I put ye there for?"

After an ominous pause, which he was too completely under her thumb to break in upon, she delivered her thunderbolt:

"I put ye there to wear out chair-bottoms!"

The Honorable Benoni Spike sunk a little closer into himself, as if he had just been drawn through a knot-hole one size smaller than the preceding.

"An' you're a-doin' of it famous!" concluded his wife, with kindling eyes.

Still he tapped his knee with his finger, in silence.

"Benoni Spike!" raising her voice to clarion tones, "we're goin' to make a speech!"

"A speech, Huldy?" quavered the Honorable Benoni, in a die-away voice.

"A speech," affirmed the Honorable Mrs. Benoni, firmly.

"But, my dear, I never did such a thing in my life."

"Ye needn't tell me that. I expect to have to hunt for ye in your boots after ye git through. But, all the same, we're goin' to make a speech!"

"But what for?—what about?" cried her victim, in dismay.

"What for? Why, to git our name in the papers, to be sure. What does anybody make speeches for?"

"But one has to have somethin' to talk about—some measure to propose. An' my constituents—"

"Bother your constituents! I'm your constituents, sir! And I have enough to talk about to keep you busy for the rest o' the session!"

To say that the Honorable Benoni wilted at this awful prospect is to represent his blank despair by a wholly inadequate figure of speech. He only gazed and gasped.

"I'll supply ye with measures to propose," continued his wife, remorselessly. "And to begin with, we're goin' on a committee."

"A committee!" panted the wretched legislator.

"A committee! And what is there so terrible about a committee? Hasn't every live man in the House been on a committee, first or last?"

The listener was too far gone to debate the matter. Already a clammy ooze was undoing the work Wing Fung had expended on his shirt-collar.

"There's Matildy Cummin's (the Honorable Mrs. Cummin's!—that jest makes me sick!)—a spiteful cat, if there ever was one!—she's been on the Committee of Ways and Means! She thinks herself great shakes. But I tell you, Benoni Spike, we're goin' to be *chairman* of a committee, an' we're goin' to travel at the expense of the State! And that's what's the matter with us!"

That completely knocked the Honorable Benoni Spike out. He looked as if one more blow would roll him off his chair.

"An investigatin' committee!—that's what we want!" cried the Honorable Mrs. Benoni Spike, with huge satisfaction.

"But what's wanted to be investigated?" asked the legislator, his mind harrowed by visions of defalcation and bribery.

"Everythin'!" affirmed Mrs. Spike, with a comprehensive wave of the hand. "But ye needn't worry over the notion that I propose to do it all. There's them anti-Chinese riots, down to Silver Riffle, that want lookin' into. Ye can't pass just laws an' regulations without knowin' what you're legislatin' about; an' ye can't know what's wantin' without havin' a committee go an' see."

"But, Huldy," pleaded her husband, faintly, knowing the hopelessness of trying to alter the purpose of his Amazonian spouse, "such a section o' country as that! It's the worst in the State—the worst this side o' the Watershed!"

"What's the matter with it?"

"Why, it's infested with robbers and cut-throats of every description! It's as much as a man's life is worth to be found within a hundred miles of Silver Riffle!"

"It is, eh? Well, I'll see about that. You needn't worry. You'll have Abigail an' me to look after ye."

"Abigail?" gasped the victim of petticoat government. "The child shall never be exposed to such peril with my consent."

That was the boldest revolt he had ventured upon within his ruler's recollection.

"Your consent!" she cried, in amazement. "Wait until your consent is asked, Mr. Spike, if you please!"

Poor Spike groaned his utter helplessness.

"But why this mad scheme? If you're bound to make a spread, there's plenty of other things without danger—"

"Mad scheme, Mr. Spike?" interrupted his wife, bridling haughtily. "I'll beg you to remember that this is *my* scheme; an' there's nothin' mad about *me*! I know what I'm about!"

"But what air ye pickin' out the most reckless—"

"Because, for one thing, I don't choose that people shall know what a pulin' coward casts my vote, an' holds the office that by right belongs to me!"

The Hon. Benoni went out under this scathing speech like a candle over which an extinguisher has been set.

"If I kin git a strappin' big road-agent to let some o' the water out o' your veins, an' then whale a mite o' spirit into ye, before I come back, I mean to do it!"

With this "clincher" Mrs. Spike strode across the room, drew out a table drawer, and took from it a pile of manuscript, which she placed before her husband.

"There's your speech," she said. "You're to learn it word for word; an' I'll hear ye speak it. All the rest will be fixed when the time comes. You're as good as Chairman o' the Committee to Investigate the Chinese troubles at Silver Riffle, before ye begin!"

The man, we are told, is the head of the woman; but it would take a very wide-awake man to get ahead of the Hon. Mrs. Benoni Spike!

Poor Benoni set about his task with the docility of a school-boy.

CHAPTER IX.

THE "THIRD HOUSE."

THAT night the Governor of the State "and his Lady" held a reception at which all the dignitaries of the Commonwealth were present.

There were representatives from the backwoods whose horny hands had never been incased in a kid glove in all their lives, and who, when they had occasion to bow, showed decided inclination to scrape their foot.

They blushed and stammered when fawned upon by jewel-and-silk-bedizened ladies with all the airs and graces of duchesses.

Many of them were simple-souled, honest fellows, who would have put a bullet through a man who had approached them with a money bribe; yet they were as wax in the hands of these siren lobbyists, who feed them only with smiles and flattery.

There were other men there, who had worn kid gloves since before they were out of jackets. They were not all so honest. They might have scorned to receive a bribe direct; but they did not all scruple to approach another with whatever influence would be most likely to bend him to their wishes.

Among these latter were two men who kept a wary eye on all who entered the brilliantly-lighted *salon*.

"Hello!" ejaculated one behind his hand, nudging the other. "Here comes the Major-General!"

"Eh, Bristow?" asked he of the bald head, whose attention had been wandering.

"Spike! Spike!" said Bristow, guardedly.

Judge Littlejohn adjusted his eye-glasses and looked down the room.

Towering above the other ladies, the Hon. Mrs. Benoni Spike was descried, sailing amid the crowd like a three-decker among a lot of merchantmen.

"Is she favorable to us?" asked Judge Littlejohn.

"We might as well hang up the fiddle and the bow, if she ain't," declared Bristow.

"Secure her by all means, my dear Bristow!" said the judge, earnestly.

"Of course we must have her," assented Bristow. "I was thinking that you were just the man to undertake—"

"I? Heaven forefend! I wouldn't meet her for—for—well, for the presidency, to put it at a low figure!"

The judge threw up his hands, aghast.

Senator Bristow laughed.

"Well! well!" he cried, "who would have thought that such an old stager as you would take water like that? Why, you are generally accounted a lady's man, equal to any emergency in dealing with the sex."

"That's all very well; but one must draw the line somewhere, you know."

"And you draw it at the Major-General?"

"Exactly. Good heavens! she's got her eyes on us!—her baleful eye, her basilisk eye! Bristow, let me get away somewhere!"

"Nonsense, man! Stand your ground."

"Not for a half-interest in Tombstone!"

"But what's to become of our bill?"

"You'll have to look out for that."

"I? Confound you! do you mean to leave me to face her alone?"

"No! no! Summon reinforcements! Ask the Governor to call out the militia! Anything!—only I'm off!"

"But, see here!—you're as much interested in this thing as I am."

And Bristow laid hold of the lapel of his fellow-senator's coat.

But the judge, determined to escape, freed himself, whispering:

"I tell you, man, she's bearing down upon us! And I give you my word, Bristow, I'll speak to His Excellency in your behalf!"

With his eye-glasses dropping from his nose in the agitation of his mock scuffle, Judge Littlejohn hurried away, covering his flight by intercepting a lady who was passing at a little distance, as if his precipitancy had had reference to her.

He bore her off on his arm, gesticulating with his eye-glasses and chatting with vivacity, as if he were oblivious to everything and everybody else in the world.

All the while, however, he was chuckling to himself in high glee:

"Left him to perfect bliss! He ought to feel indebted to me for the rest of his natural life!"

Meanwhile, Bristow was muttering below his breath:

"Confound his impudence! If I didn't see a cool hundred thousand in this thing for my own pocket, I'd let him whistle!"

Nevertheless, he looked after his friend (and confederate!) with an amused smile, which, when he turned and—apparently for the first time—caught sight of the Hon. Mrs. Benoni Spike, changed into a pleased recognition, as he pressed his way through the crowd to greet her.

"My dear Mrs. Spike!—and you, sir!"—warmly grasping the hand of the helpless little man whom the lady had in tow—"this is indeed a pleasure! But why are you so late?"

"Great jam, isn't it?" said the Hon. Benoni, feeling that he must say something, yet conscious that the senator paid no heed to him.

"Bristow," said the Hon. Mrs. Benoni, with the familiarity of a coquette, as coolly ignoring her husband as if he were not present, "what did you and Teddy Littlejohn have your heads together about? Plottin' mischief, I'll be bound! Naughty boys!"

And she struck him on the arm with her fan. "No! no! honor bright; you wrong us," protested that gentleman. "Positively, we had a far pleasanter theme."

"What theme?"

"You know the adage: 'Talk of angels,' etc."

"Oh, come, now! Ye don't mean to make me believe that you were talkin' about me?"

"Indeed we were, and in a most complimentary vein, on the judge's part. We want you to help us out on the Appropriation Bill."

"You know, Spike,"—turning to the Hon. Benoni—"that you have some mole-eyed fellows in your House, who can never see beyond the dollar to be laid down, to the two dollars the State is to take up."

The Hon. Benoni, who was himself just one of those "mole-eyed fellows" who had a keen eye looking to the economy of the State's money, was about to make some "old foggy" reply, when the Hon. Mrs. Benoni, whose motto was "Look out for No. 1, and all those things will be added unto you," interrupted him peremptorily.

"My dear," she whispered, behind her fan, with her eyes on a group at the other end of the room, "go and take that muff away from Abigail! Don't you see that he's fillin' the place of a better man? Take him away to drink, or smoke, or anything else—only take him away, and keep him away!"

The Hon. Benoni saw his daughter—a slip of a girl, who looked as little like her mother as she did like him—blushing and casting shy glances up into the face of a young Don Whiskerando, who bent devotedly low over her, as he whispered the Lord-knows-what into her shrinking, yet willing ear.

"That girl will be the death of me!" reflected the Hon. Mrs. Benoni, as she secretly bit her lips with vexation, though the society smile was not allowed to leave her face. "She will have that quill-driving vagabond tagging after her, when she knows that a feather's weight may turn the balance with Lisperard de Morgan. He's already beginning to look bored and inattentive."

The Hon. Benoni yielded his wife to Senator Bristow with an embarrassed bow, and took himself dutifully off.

Making his way to where his daughter was seated, he first saluted a young dude who stood listlessly beside her chair.

Lisperard de Morgan was a fair blonde creature, with delicate white hands and pink cheeks, with a scant growth of pale yellow hair parted to a nicety in the middle, with faded blue eyes, white lashes, and scarcely visible brows, and with a tow-colored mustache which was at once his pet vanity and his sorest trial, since the most assiduous culture yielded so meager results.

His clothes were made in London, and he had

made several pilgrimages to that Mecca of feather-brained swells, to study their manners.

He sported the British eye-glass, and affected the British flaccidity at all times when he was not practicing the British stare.

"D'lighted to see ye, me deah suh!" he said, blurring the words as if it required too great an effort to articulate distinctly. "Jolly jam, eh? Horrid boah!"

He feebly extended his hand, letting it hang limp, while his eyes wandered languidly about the room, after the first passing glance at Benoni.

The latter took the proffered hand as gingerly as if it were a fragile device of glass. Notwithstanding his subjection to his wife, there was manhood enough in him to feel that this dear creature, with his perfume and his cosmetics, was a puppy of the first water.

From him he turned to Hugh Cole, who, being only a reporter on the *Chronicle*, had the knack of always appearing the best dressed man in the room.

Honest Hugh! fun-loving Hugh! Hugh who, alas! was so sore an anxiety to managing mammas, who knew that he hadn't, and probably never would have, a rap to bless himself with!

Some said it was his whiskers, which were so black and so glossy; some held that it was the twinkle in his eyes; some averred that it was the tip of his tongue that did the mischief; it was even hinted that it might be the elegance of his figure and his divine dancing.

If a young lady were consulted, as like as not she would evade the question.

"Nonsense! He was a horrid man, like all the rest! For her part, she had never given him a second thought!"

All of which must be taken with a large pinch of salt!

"Mr. Spike, I'll leave it to you," he burst forth, grasping the Hon. Benoni's hand with a warm, hearty grip that did one's soul good. "You're a man of discrimination, and not to be swerved from principle by any little domestic bias."

"Papa decides with me!" interrupted Miss Abigail, with a shy laugh.

"Let us discuss the matter over a cigar," suggested Benoni Spike, with an affectionate glance at his daughter, while he held Hugh Cole's hand lingeringly. "Besides I have a point for you."

A knowing twinkle came into Hugh Cole's eyes. He had seen the Major-General send her staff officer across the field, and a glance at Lisperard de Morgan showed that he saw through the little device.

But he was wise in his day and generation. He knew that one may sometimes gain the victory by yielding the field.

"You know that it isn't the cigar, nor even the 'point'—which is so dear to a reporter—that takes me from your side, Miss Spike," he said, as he linked his arm through her father's.

And she was not coquette enough to say that she believed a cigar would tempt him away at any time. On the contrary, she looked after him with a faint blush.

CHAPTER X.

WIRE-PULLING.

MEANWHILE Senator Bristow had been expatiating on the merits of his appropriation bill. It was just the thing to put money into everybody's pocket, by showing Eastern capitalists that California was in the van of enterprise, and was the spot of all spots in which to cast their bread upon the waters.

The Hon. Mrs. Benoni Spike took the matter quite coolly, considering his glowing enthusiasm. It was, doubtless, worth considering. She would endeavor to interest Mr. Spike in it. Then she branched off into a general discussion of local and national politics.

"What is the old fox after, I wonder?" was Senator Bristow's secret speculation, as he chatted away, watching her narrowly. "There's no use in beating about the bush, if she did but know it. I am prepared to make any kind of terms."

"But we have our hands full at home," she said; presently. "These Chinese troubles are a disgrace to the State."

"Ah! now for it!" reflected the subtle Bristow. "It's a matter of heart and conscience with her, no doubt!"

Aloud he said: "Just what I was saying to Littlejohn! Something ought to be done, certainly."

"I believe Mr. Spike is thinkin' of callin' the attention of the House to the matter," she went on, in a vague, off-hand way.

"I say!" cried Bristow, with enthusiasm. "I have the very thing! What we want is a joint committee, with Spike as chairman. Put the thing through your House, my dear madam, and I'll guarantee the concurrence of the Senate."

"Mr. Spike's business engagements will probably keep him closely occupied during the recess," began Mrs. Spike.

But the subtle Bristow knew that she was "playing off."

"Nonsense!" he cried. "It will be a mere formality. And besides, you want a little trip

during the summer. There's nothing like the Silver Riffle region this side of the Yosemite. We'll put the thing through with a rush."

Both knew that this was a bargain, *quid pro quo*, the committee to be formed first.

In due time the Hon. Benoni Spike made his speech.

The Major-General sat where she had the *claque* she had provided directly under her eye; so the speaker was applauded to the echo.

The House's part of the committee—to consist of two from that body and one from the Senate—was appointed, the proposer, according to precedent, being made chairman, and the resolutions sent "across the passage."

In presenting them to that august counsel of state, Senator Bristow took occasion to compliment the Hon. Benoni Spike, and to congratulate his constituents on having so eloquent a representative.

The Senate concurred with a languid vote from which no one took the trouble to dissent, and the president appointed Judge Littlejohn to represent that body on the committee.

"Good heavens!" cried the Judge fairly gasping for breath, as he leaned over to his neighbor, Jerry Bristow. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Keep cool!" warned Bristow, who was bursting with laughter in his sleeve. "She has determined to give eclat to the thing by associating you."

"Hang her committee! I'll not submit to be made a fool of in this way!" cried the irate Judge, getting very red in the face.

"Look out! She's got her eye on you!" pleaded Bristow, catching hold of the Judge to keep him in his seat, and prevent him from rising and excusing himself from the service, which he meditated.

"What! serve on a committee with that—*that sheep* at the head of it?" fumed the unlucky judge.

"I tell you, man! she'll throw us over if you balk her!" urged Bristow. "She'll have her committee with a man who will answer next best to you; and we can whistle for our appropriation!"

"And I am to be cat's-paw to pull your chestnuts out of the fire?"

"She'll spike our guns for us if you don't, as sure as you're a living man!"

"Blast her!" groaned the Judge, whose "French" we take the liberty to euphemize, out of deference to the reader's presumed prejudice against the more forcible forms of expression.

Bristow set himself to the task of proving that the situation was not half so bad as the Judge seemed to think.

All the while, however, he was secretly chuckling:

"I've seen him, and gone one better! He'll leave me in the lurch, will he? They laugh best who laugh last!"

So far the Major-General had come off with flying colors. She had got her committee, with Judge Littlejohn from the Senate and Uncle Billy Hodgson in the House.

Uncle Billy was a jolly old fellow, as round as a barrel and as rosy as a fall pippin. He was everybody's friend, and nobody's enemy. He would drink with the "boys" as long as there was a bottle with a whole neck, or a man steady enough on his pins to cant a barrel; yet, though he swore that his district had the worst whisky that ever came from a still, it never phased him.

But when it came to the ladies—ah! then Uncle Billy was at his best! He loved them all—the dear creatures! Married or single, old or young, good-looking or homely—"A petticoat's a petticoat!" said Uncle Billy.

As a politician, Uncle Billy was a power. He might have gone to the Senate; but he protested that they were too fine for him in there. He might have gone to Congress; but he swore that it would break his heart to leave "the boys."

"Jest you leave me whar I'm happy!" was his unvarying reply to those who would have piqued his ambition. "In the House hyer I kin take it rough an' tumble with the best of 'em. I know my old stampin'-ground; an' it 'ud take too long to git the hang of new-fangled ways. Ye can't larn an' old dog new tricks, ye onderstand!"

Meeting his colleague in the lobby, he shouted at the top of his voice:

"Waal, Senator! they've hitched us to the plow together at last, hain't they? I reckon they're allowin' as me an' Spike is to do the stiddy pullin', with you to do the cavertin'—slingin' the style, ye onderstand! Haw! Haw! Haw! Haw!"

And with a roar of laughter that drew every eye in their direction, he slapped Judge Littlejohn a sounding thwack on the shoulder; stepped back so as to regard him with his head thrown back and his mouth wide open, his uproarious mirth abruptly turned into a mute pantomime of jollity; then thrust forward his hand, crying heartily:

"Putt'er thar fur the war!"

The Judge tried to cover his annoyance with a nervous laugh, and submitted his hand to a shaking that nearly discolored his shoulder. He

knew how many votes Uncle Billy carried "in his breeches pocket;" and he was too shrewd to provoke, by unseasonable "airs," the putting of a "dark horse" in the field in a certain pending election.

For the same reason he was the extreme of complaisance to Mrs. Spike with his lips, while he execrated her in his heart.

She, reading him "like a book," yet with her ambition satisfied, was all sweetness in return.

He should have his Appropriation bill; but she had him!

So in due time this ill-assorted committee entered upon its investigations.

The papers had leaders discounting the investigation with the demand that the Heathen "must go;" and in the gossip corner appeared paragraphs hinting mysteriously at the significance of that society's pet, sweet Lispinard, making one of the party, which was graced by the Hon. Mrs. Spike and her charming and accomplished daughter.

There was but one drop of gall in Mrs. Spike's cup of otherwise perfect felicity.

The enterprising *Chronicle* sent its spiciest reporter to serve to the dear public with its breakfast coffee, a graphic picture of the Silver Riffle region.

Abigail blushed, Hugh smiled, and the Hon. Mrs. Spike groaned:

"Contwist his ugly pictur'!"

In the coach, which bore them through some of the grandest scenery in the world, Judge Littlejohn sat morosely in the corner, bundled to the chin in his great-coat, nursing his discontent like a bear with a sore head.

Equally oblivious to Nature's gratuitous display of her wonders, Uncle Billy Hodgson held forthon the then existing political muddle, with a marvelous grasp of statistics equaled only by his unruffled cheerfulness and enthusiastic faith in the ultimate triumph of the party. He had the thing down to a demonstration.

The Hon. Benoni Spike, who was the only one who even pretended to listen to Uncle Billy's complicated mathematical puzzle, sat nervously on the edge of the seat, glancing apprehensively from side to side out of the coach windows. To him a yawning chasm suggested the possibility of a linchpin dropping out, while a boulder was the presumptive hiding-place of some conscienceless road-agent.

Lispinard de Morgan yawned and exhausted his meager power of expressing his sense of the situation, by declaring that they had "got themselves in a jolly mess, coming into a region which was as far from having English roads as English hedge-rows. A new country was romantic and all that, but deuced uncomfortable, ye know!"

This crushing criticism was delivered in a vague sort of way to Abigail, who, under the admonition of her mother's frown, gave one ear to the peevish inanities of his dudieship, while drinking in through the other Hugh Cole's animated comment on the scenery.

Hugh laughed in his sleeve, as he contrasted the stately politeness with which the mother followed his suggestion, with the quick glance of the daughter in the direction he pointed out. He was at his best. His fund of anecdote and illustration seemed inexhaustible.

In vain did the Hon. Mrs. Benoni try to "shut him off." He outflanked all her subtle maneuvers, as politely as dexterously.

Like the prudish spinster who had daily for forty years been looking for a man where she did not wish to find one, the Hon. Benoni Spike was the only one of the party who was at all prepared for the interruption that broke in upon their varied interests.

It came in the time-honored form of the Far West.

"Halt! Throw up your hands!"

"I hyear ye, my boy!" responded the stage-driver, cheerfully. "Whoa! Stiddy, Mariar!"

And the coach came to an abrupt stand-still, while the restive off leader forced her yoke-fellow round until their noses were at the wheel.

CHAPTER XI.

UNCLE BILLY'S FINANCIERING.

ALL within the coach were startled.

"Good Lord!" groaned the Hon. Benoni Spike; and he collapsed in total demoralization.

"Eh!" ejaculated Judge Littlejohn, starting out of his morose isolation.

"Blow me tight!" cried Uncle Billy Hodgson, with a look of cheerful astonishment. "The boys have called us!"

"By Jove, ye know!" protested sweet Lispinard de Morgan, "this is in deuced pooah taste! The beggahs may give us trouble."

"It's a game that two can play at!" said Hugh Cole, coolly, clapping his hand to his hip.

"Oh, Mr. Cole!" interposed Abigail, seizing his arm, all in a pretty panic. "Don't offer any resistance! What is our money compared with your life?"

Hugh looked into the blue depths of her startled, pleading eyes; and in the thrill of ecstasy which her solicitude woke in his breast, the road-agents without were almost blotted from his thoughts.

How like some artist's ideal, chiseled in purest

marble, was her face—the pale cheek; the bloodless lips, but for their tremulousness; the delicate nostrils, through whose pink *alae* the light shone as through a thin shell; the smooth, rounded brow!

All of which was very pretty for him, but not at all to the taste of the designing mamma!

"Benoni Spike!" she cried, "are you or are you not the legal as well as natural protector of our child? I ask nothin' of you in my behalf; but—"

"My dear Mrs. Spike!" interposed Uncle Billy Hodgson, as blind as any mole to this little maternal *finesse*, "there ain't the least mite of a call for a scare. The boys will have their little amusement; but, Lord bless you, ma'am! they're as harmless as kittens."

He beamed upon everybody, rubbing his hands as with a keen relish.

"Take it coolly, and above all things good-naturedly. Variety is the spice of life. No matter what turns up, call it a joke—a huge joke, and you will find yourself on the laughing side of it. Why, what did we come hyer for, I'd like to know? To learn the manners and customs of the country! We're learnin' 'em!"

And he winked and threw back his head, with his mouth agape.

"Let the horses alone, and keep your hands where they won't be getting into mischief!" commanded a high-pitched, musical voice.

"Eh? Listen to that!" cried Uncle Billy, a new delight beaming in his eyes. "It's a mere lad, as I'm a mortal sinner! Well, well, gentlemen! what *won't* this hyar climate produce, when our very children take to the revolver before they are fairly out of their bib and tucker? A wonderful country!—a *wonderful* country! I always said it; and now I'll swear to it!"

In the midst of his enthusiasm a horse was reined up beside the coach, and its rider threw open the door, commanding:

"Come out of there; and come without delay! You will do well to obey without cavil! Remember that a bullet ends all debate with unanswerable logic!"

"A woman!" gasped Uncle Billy, opening his eyes to their widest extent to express his astonishment. "A female woman! *Gee-lo-ry-ink-tum!*"

There could be no question of the fact.

Although the face was hidden behind a black mask, the contour of the figure, apart from all considerations of dress, revealed the sex of the rider to an intelligent eye.

Her dress was a compromise between the costume of a *caballero* and the ordinary riding-habit of a Spanish lady.

Of course she rode in a manner which would have scandalized an American woman, though so common with the sex in Mexico; and for greater convenience her *bottas* of Cordovan leather, armed with golden spurs, reached to mid-thigh.

Her hair, doubtless plaited and arranged compactly on the top of her head, was concealed beneath a silken handkerchief, the whole surmounted by a sombrero of most gorgeous description.

Seen through the eye-holes of her mask, her great, dark, liquid eyes seemed to fairly scintillate with an altogether unangelic emotion.

But to Uncle Billy a woman was a woman.

"Bless their leetle gizzards!" he was wont to say, "they're all angels of one kind or the other—angels of light, or angels of darkness! And blow me if I know which holds over t'other! I like a dash o' the devil in 'em, an' no mistake!"

Now he turned abruptly to Hugh Cole, and grasping his hand with hearty congratulation, cried:

"Don, my boy, this is the item you have been looking for all your life! Write it up!—write it up strong! Somewhere between the cradle and the grave, there's bound to come a time when every man wishes he was a reporter. I envy you your knack at quill-drivin' now! If I stood in your shoes, I'd make that woman famous—or infamous! ha! ha! ha!—the world round!"

Without break he turned from the reporter to the female outlaw, and advancing through the coach door, addressed her, lifting his hat gallantly.

"Madam, we are all your most humble servants! For myself, I beg you to believe th t this is the proudest hour of my life! I am a zealous advocate of women's rights; and I hail you as a sort of a—a—a Caesar, so to speak, of the sex!"

The Queen of the Road Agents looked at him curiously, without replying, or relaxing the indentation between her straight brows.

She waved her hand, to indicate her wish that he pass on and leave room for the others to alight.

His cheerfulness not at all dampened by this cool reception of his homage, Uncle Billy beamed as genially on the bearded fellows who, armed to the teeth like the cut-throats they were, rode at her back.

"Well, boys," he said, "hyere we are again! What's trumps?"

"Rocks, boss; an' we're a-callin' yer!" was the quick reply.

"Go fur 'im, Ab!" cried a colleague. "He sings such a chipper tune that I'd like to hear

what he makes of slower measure. Strike him where he lives!"

"Come! shell out!" ordered Ab, tersely.

"Good! good! Ha! ha! ha!" roared Uncle Billy, as if he had not heard so rare a joke for a year.

"Eh? What air ye tryin' to git through ye?" asked the outlaw, with a black frown, at a loss to make out this unusual manner of responding to a call for wayside contributions.

Not at all disturbed, Uncle Billy proceeded to explain his understanding of the joke.

"Shell out, ye know—shells, nut-shells, without any kernel. My dear Ab, you must have twigged my occupation."

"Hang yer occupation!" growled the outlaw. "It's money as talks. Plank the ready without nary more foolishness. Ye can't zweinickel me!"

"Money!" cried Uncle Billy, elevating his brows as if he had never before heard of so astonishing a demand. "Is it money you're after? Why, I thought all along that it was glory!"

"I'll send you to glory if you don't come down!"

"But, my dear sir, I never have any money!"

"Never have any money?"

"Never!"

"Look a' hyar, old chap! I don't want none o' your gaff!"

"But I'm tellin' you a plain fact in all seriousness."

"Never have no money?"

"Never," and Uncle Billy turned his pockets inside out, showing that they contained nothing but a bunch of keys and a pen-knife.

"Hang me ef I wouldn't like to have some of your cheek, then, as you travel this wide world through!" cried the disgusted outlaw.

"I am a politician," explained Uncle Billy, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

"But how do ye pay yer debts?" asked the robber, following the matter up curiously.

"Ho! we never pay any debts!" said Uncle Billy, with an indulgent smile. "We only strike a sort of balance once in a while, when the opportunity offers."

"An' how do ye strike a balance without no money?"

"Why, you see, I have a barrel at home, full of bills—not bank bills, you understand, but bills for merchandise had."

"The deuce you have!"

"Oh, yes! That's not at all uncommon—with a politician. When I want anything, I order it sent round, with the bill; and then I throw the bill into the barrel. That's how they collect."

"An' nary a one of 'em receipted, I'll be bound!"

"Receipted? Of course not. They would be of no more use than so much waste-paper, if they were receipted. As it is, they are as precious as love-letters."

"An' what good are they without bein' receipted, I'd like to know?"

"Why, they are the instruments of my power. They call for votes."

"Hang me if I'd vote for a man that owed me money!"

"You wouldn't? That shows that you can't see beyond the end of your nose. Come up to our section, an' we'll teach you a thing or two."

"You kin give me a pointer now, if you're a mind to."

"Well, you see, it works like this. When an ambitious man comes to me and says—Uncle Billy, I want this office or that office, I roll up my sleeve, go down into the barrel, and fish up what I can grab of the bills. 'There!' says I. 'I keep a little autograph album. When you bring me the autographs of my friends on these loose slips, you're as good as elected.' That humors his whim for fame; an' the boys chuckle as they pocket the sugar, an' call me a clever fellow. They'd rather take his money than mine, any day."

"But, my Christian friend," pursued Uncle Billy, taking the robber by the sleeve, and lowering his voice confidentially, "if you adopt my way, always take the bills from the top. It's the fellows—hang 'em!—that have waited on you the shortest time that makes the greatest row. After they have been buried out of sight in the barrel for a year or two, they git used to it, an' don't expect anything."

"Not from the likes o' you, I'll go bail!" laughed an Irishman of the road-agent party.

"Then what's the use of my carryin' a pocket-book, when I have so many friends to carry it for me?" continued Uncle Billy. "A careless fellow like me would be forever losin' his money or gettin' robbed!"

Uncle Billy winked and the robbers laughed, forgetting to be annoyed at not getting anything out of him more substantial than—gas!

CHAPTER XII.

THE MAJOR-GENERAL "KICKS."

MEANWHILE the rest of the party were alighting from the coach, in obedience to the command of the Road-Agent Queen.

"A pretty kettle of fish," growled Judge Littlejohn, reflecting on the chaff he would be pelted with by the newspapers, and secretly anathe-

matizing the woman who had drawn him into such a scrape.

"We'll never come through it with our lives!" groaned the Hon. Benoni Spike, who was in such a state of moral and physical collapse that Hugh Cole offered him his arm.

But Mrs. Spike was too angry to yield to fear.

"Was there ever such a brazen creature?" she cried, flashing a look of withering scorn upon the Queen of the Road-Agents.

Then turning to the sturdy fellows who obeyed her slightest beck, she threw down this scathing challenge:

"Are you men to allow yourselves to be led about by this trapesing hussy?"

"Take it coolly, ma'am," warned one of the outlaws, "or we may find it necessary to put a porous-plaster over your mouth!"

"Benoni Spike!" cried his wife, with now a ring of hysterical rage in her voice, "am I to be insulted by these wretches? It's little protection that I may look for from such a—"

"My dear," groaned the Hon. Benoni, "you have brought it all upon yourself. God knows I would never have come to this wilderness of iniquity but that you baited me to it."

This poltroonery roused Mrs. Spike's standing irritation against her husband, and turning to the outlaw, she cried:

"See here, Mr. Robber! I'll forgive your insolence to me, if you will cut a gad as big as your thumb, and take that shivering coward and whale him until he bellers like a calf!"

"Oh, mamma! how can you?" cried Abigail.

And slipping by sweet Lisperard de Morgan's rather flaccid offer of assistance, she sprang lightly to the ground, and running to her father, threw her arms about his neck, turning her head to look at the road-agent with eyes that blended pleading with defiance.

"A charming mother-in-law!" reflected the dear dude.

But the ghosts of unpaid tailors' bills rose to haunt him; and adjuring them in the name of a certain bonanza in which the Hon. Benoni Spike held a controlling interest, he resigned himself to his fate with a sigh, feeling that he went as a sheep to the shambles!

Hugh Cole's eyes were upon Abigail. Her championship of her father set a glow about his heart.

There was another not untouched by it. The outlaw lifted his hat and said:

"You needn't be skeared o' me, miss. There don't nobody put upon the old man while you're by, you bet yer rocks!"

"Thank you!" said the girl, feeling that he was a very magnanimous rascal after all.

By this time Uncle Billy Hodgson had had his little joke with the outlaw who sought to "strike him whar he lived;" and with unabated cheerfulness he addressed the Queen of the Road-Agents:

"I suppose, ma'am, it is now in order for us to get into line preparatory to being plucked."

Her manner showed that she was unaffected by the little episode in which Abigail had been an actor; and equally heedless of Uncle Billy, she waved her hand in a doubtless preconcerted signal to her subordinates.

It set them in motion, to the end that several led horses were brought forward.

"You will mount the horses that are severally supplied to you," said the Queen to the astonished travelers.

"Mount the horses? What for?" asked Judge Littlejohn, sourly, her eyes happening to rest upon him as she issued the order.

"Because you are my prisoners, and I command you to!" was the haughty response.

"But, my dear madam," interposed Uncle Billy, blandly, with that repeated bowing which is intended as a mark of signal deference, while he "washed his hands with the invisible soap in imperceptible water," "is not this a little irregular? As for the filthy lucre, take it, and permit us to go on our way rejoicing. There is no reason why one should be heavier of heart because lighter of purse. But to impede a servant of this great commonwealth in the performance of duty—that, madam, is a more serious matter."

"Throw them into the saddle!" cried the Queen of the Road-Agents, her dark, Spanish eyes flashing fire, while the imperious gesture of her little hand was truly regal.

Like men accustomed to instant and unquestioning obedience, the outlaws leaped to the ground and proceeded to execute her orders literally.

Judge Littlejohn was caught off his feet and set astride a plunging and snorting horse with a celerity that "made his head swim."

Resigning himself hopelessly to his fate, the Hon. Benoni Spike was tossed into position like a sack of meal.

The two brawny fellows who precipitated themselves upon Uncle Billy had more difficulty. With his bulbous "corporation" and his fat legs, he turned the scale at too high a figure to allow of his inertia being overcome without more deliberate effort.

"Don't drop me, boys!—I'm tender!" he chuckled, as he put an arm about the neck of either, while they staggered beneath his weight.

"Merciful Fathers!" screamed the Honorable Mrs. Spike, fighting off her assailants tooth and nail. "You don't dast to touch me, you brutes! I'm a lady and the wife of a legislator of the State of California! I'll have you hanged for this outrage! You, ma'am, if you have a spark of shame left in you, call off your wretches!"

"BENONI!"

That shrill appeal to her husband, which marked the moment when she was "sailing through the air," was the woman's involuntary recognition of him as her natural head, when it came to physical violence, though she had bullied him for years.

Meanwhile the sweet dude came in for his share of discomfiture.

"Oh, I say! Really, now!" he protested.

But his persecutors thought themselves in especial good luck, getting so fair a subject as a butt of indignity.

"Give him the grand bounce, Tom!" cried one of them. "One! two! three! and away he goes!"

His eye-glass flew in one direction, his heels in another, as they tossed him a complete somersault.

Feeling as if he had been struck by a Western tornado, he found himself astride a beast that wouldn't stand still, clinging to its mane for dear life, his hat gone, and his coat turned over his head.

Her father actually assaulted, Abigail shrunk back in terror, to feel a not over-gentle hand laid on her own shoulder.

But Hugh Cole sprang before her; she saw his arm shoot out straight from the shoulder, heard the dull thud of his clinched knuckles rapping a rather hard head, and was free!

"Hands off, my man!" rung out his manly baritone, in a cadence of command about which there could be no mistake. "This is my office, if you please!"

And quickly catching Abigail in his arms, he placed her in the saddle so deftly and so gently that her horse was not startled, but for the prancing of his fellows.

Her arm clung about his neck, her eyes sought his appealingly, as she said, in a low, agitated voice:

"Oh, Hugh! don't let them harm papa!"

He started. This was the first real glimpse into her heart he had ever had.

How often she must have repeated his name to herself, to be thus totally unaware that she had uttered it aloud!

But there was no time just then for even so much as a quick pressure of the arm that encircled her, to recall her to self-consciousness, and to tell her by love's telegraphy that he knew and was glad.

In springing to her rescue, he had eluded the outlaws who sought to seize him, and his lightning blow had won their admiration, so that they stopped and stared, their faces on a broad grin of appreciative surprise.

"By gum! gents, he's been thar before!" cried one of their number.

"Fur a swipe as is a swipe, he's jest greased lightning!"

"But Black Barnaby! An' he fotched him the fu'st pass."

"He'll swaller 'im!"

"Don't you resk nothin' on that thar proposition. Thar never was a good man but he found his better."

The burly ruffian whom Hugh had felled to the ground rose again to his feet with the look and roar of an enraged bull, except that his roar added blasphemy to sound.

"Swing open the door down below!" he bel-lowed; "fur hyar's a pilgrim bound for sheol, hot-foot!"

And as he struggled to his knees, he snatched a huge revolver from its holster at his back, and brought it round to the front.

CHAPTER XIII.

HUGH "DOTS AN I."

WITH a light spring and a deft kick, Hugh sent the weapon spinning from the ruffian's hand.

Abigail, who had been paralyzed into silence by the sight of his peril, put her hand to her heart and swayed in her saddle; but the perception that he was not yet safe kept her from fainting.

Black Barnaby, who owed his *sobriquet* to his mop of raven hair and beard, and to the devilish malignity of his frown when enraged, leaped to his feet, shrinking back and crouching like a wild beast preparing for a spring, while he glared with brutish astonishment and murderous hate at the man who had twice thwarted him.

A moment thus, and then, with a harsh hissing sound which was more terrible, more deadly than his louder demonstration of anger, plucked a bowie from his hip, and hurled himself upon his enemy, with a downward chopping blow that seemed as if it might cleave him to the waist.

Hugh planted himself firmly upon his feet, and met the rush without flinching.

He arrested the descending bowie by catching the wrist of the murderer in his left hand; and seizing his belt with the other, he executed a quick spring and twist, used in shoulder-and-

elbow wrestling, which brought his body under that of the bully so that the latter lay fairly across his back. In this position it required no great exertion of his muscles to toss his antagonist into the air, turning him over and landing him on his back with a crash that knocked the breath out of his body.

A dexterous wrench at the same time caused the bowie to drop from his nerveless grasp.

Hugh caught it up, and presenting it hilt-foremost to the Queen of the Road-Agents, said, with a courtly and altogether self-possessed bow:

"Madam, if you have a better man, fetch him on."

The woman's eyes widened and brightened with admiration as she received the weapon.

"I have no better man," she said. "And if I had, you should not be exposed to so unfair an attack again, after so gallant a defense."

"Oh, that's nothing!" said Hugh, with a careless wave of the hand. "Every school-boy ought to be up in those little tricks."

"The which deuced few school-boys be, or I'm a liar!" muttered one of the outlaws with enthusiasm.

"Are you unarmed?" asked the Queen of the Road-Agents.

"Hardly!" replied Hugh, with a smile. "I'm not so thoroughly unfledged a tenderfoot as to come into a country like this without the means of defending myself."

"Yet, with your life menaced—"

"By such a fellow? He's not so dangerous as he looks, my dear madam."

"He is the most powerful man I have in all my force."

"But not the quickest, I'll venture to say."

And Hugh cast a smiling glance around on the men which put them all in excellent humor with him. Each flattered himself that he had been singled out by "the boss" as Black Barnaby's superior in quickness, if not in strength, and all rejoiced to see overthrown the bully whom all feared.

Meanwhile Black Barnaby had been gathering his scattered wits and getting on his pins again. He rose with the ugly look of a buffalo bull, downed, but not done for. It was plain that he was one of those hard-headed fellows who never know when they are whipped.

"At all events, he doesn't seem to have had enough," said Hugh, standing gracefully at ease. "For his own sake, I should prefer that he would not force any more dirty work upon me."

"He shall not!" cried the Queen of the Road-Agents. "Halt where you are! Another step toward this gentleman, and I will pierce you to the heart!"

She transferred the bowie to her left hand; and plucking a glittering stiletto from her girdle, threw back her hand ready to hurl the deadly toy at her subordinate if he dared to mutiny against her will.

He stopped at once, and stood with hanging head, casting a single glare of hate under his beetling brows at his nonchalant conqueror.

"Don't play the hog, Barny!" muttered one of his companions. "A man ought to know when he's got his belly full."

"To horse!" cried the Queen of the Road-Agents.

And all bounded into the saddle.

"Forward!" commanded the Outlaw Queen, herself leading the way.

With a great whisking of tails, a flying of heels, and a scattering of gravel, the whole cavalcade swung into a spanking gallop.

It was evident to the party that, whatever their fate was to be, this act of brigandage had been carefully planned, since side-saddles had been provided for both of the ladies.

They, both being used to equestrian travel, rode without discomfort.

But, alas, for "the dude, the dandy dude!" He had trotted "on the boulevard," beating his sides with his elbows like a bantam getting ready to crow; but when it came to the wild, free gallop of this country in which everything accommodates itself to the immensity of "elbow-room," his hair fairly rose on end. With bowed back, he clung to his horse's mane, at every bound whaling the poor beast's sides with his legs as if they were flails.

The Hon. Benoni Spike could manage a horse better than he could a woman; so in that respect nothing was added to his mental disturbance.

Judge Littlejohn rode with set teeth, the vocabulary of even Western execration inadequate to express his sentiments toward the woman who had got him into this scrape.

Uncle Billy Hodgson laughed as he panted:

"This will be the death of me, if I don't break the back of this unfortunate beast before long!"

Hugh Cole was gallantly attentive to Mrs. Spike. He knew that Abigail could take care of herself, and that she was content to ride at her father's side.

Standing in the middle of the road with his hands in his pockets, and looking after his departing passengers and then at his empty coach, the driver said, with great coolness, all things considered:

"Tally one fur a sweep!"

For three days the outlaws threaded the mazy windings of mountain gorges, penetrating deeper and deeper into the wild fastnesses where it seemed as if the foot of man had never before trodden.

Hugh Cole was the only one of the prisoners that tried to take account of the direction they followed. He alone meditated the possibility of escape counter to the will of their detainers.

When they reached their final destination, a peak-circumvallated glade far from the habitations of men, he estimated that they had come a hundred and fifty or two hundred miles.

There the Golden Serpent left them under the guardianship of her men, while she went away on a mission of the nature of which she said nothing.

Then the days succeeded one another in monotonous suspense.

At such a distance from the point of capture, the chance of rescue was a slender one. To what end had their captors taken so extreme precaution?

"It is a bold scheme, a little out of the common," said Uncle Billy Hodgson, when in company with his fellow unfortunates he speculated as to the undivulged purpose of their abduction. "That lovely little Greaser—God bless her!—has imported a trick from her land of romance and song, and proposes to hold us for ransom. I wonder what Uncle Billy Hodgson is worth to his friends!"

"But if one's friends should decline to impoverish themselves for his benefit, that would be deucedly awkward, ye know!" suggested Lispinard de Morgan, anxiously, as he reflected on the riotous living that had made ducks and drakes of the patrimony which had thus far enabled him to shine as King of the Dudes and the darling of the ladies.

What now was the evanescent glory of the carpet knight? Even he felt that it would be embarrassing to owe his release to the generosity of the Hon. Benoni Spike before he had so much as proposed for the hand of his daughter.

"Y-y-e-e-s!—a leetle awkward for him," admitted Uncle Billy. "But the skull and crossbones gentry are not likely to trouble themselves about that."

And having offered this scant comfort, he went on:

"Meanwhile, with an ache in every joint, and every muscle a painful protest against this inhuman outrage—for a fat man, I want ye to understand, can't ride post-haste with impunity—every fiber of my being demands—*something to eat!* Suppose we have a bite."

And, having affected mock-eloquent declamation, as he reached his absurd climax he laughed jollily.

The repast to which they addressed themselves was such as the appetite born of "roughing it" makes an endurable alternative to starvation.

But alas once more for the dude, the dainty dude!

Sweet Lispinard de Morgan had been on the rack of infinitesimal tortures ever since his capture. His delicate limbs were sadly chafed; he had soiled his gloves until he could but look upon them with aesthetic horror; his hat was gone, and he was in despair at the inevitable prospect of getting sun-burnt and ruining his complexion. Add to this the necessity of having to swallow meat gritty with cinders from the coals on which it had been scorched, and wash it down with the muddy water they gave him in the name of coffee, and his disgust was perhaps not wholly without excuse.

"It's the horridest mess I ever tasted!" he groaned.

"What's that?" demanded a gruff voice, so close behind him that it made him jump.

And turning his white face to the grim visage that scowled over his shoulder, he realized that, however justifiable his opinion, he had chosen an unfortunate time to express it.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION.

"I—I—NOTHING!" stammered the unhappy dude.

But the hour of repentance had passed.

"Ho, cook!" shouted the fellow, lustily.

"Don't—don't trouble him, or yourself, I beg of you!" petitioned De Morgan, a cold perspiration starting from every pore.

"Ef the fare ain't all right, we might as well make it so," insisted the outlaw. "Ho! cook, I say!"

"Why in Cain don't you say it, then?" demanded a revolver-and-bowie-knife-armed ruffian, with a voice like a robber chief's in a melodrama.

And the owner of the deep base voice, the mere sound of which made sweet Lispinard shiver, rose with a long-handled "spider" in one hand, and in the other a coffee-pot as black and battered as smoke and the rough-and-tumble of camp-life could make it—rose and rose, until he towered a veritable giant before his affrighted critic.

He was only six feet tall, but to Lispinard he looked twelve!

"This hyar gent's a-growlin' about the ra-

tions," said he who had overheard the complaint. "You're a blamed purty feller, to bring disgrace on this hyar crowd as has sot you up fur to do the handsome thing by its guests!"

"What's the row with the grub?" demanded the giant cook, scowling blackly.

"Nothing, nothing, I assure you!" said sweet Lispinard, with a very decided quaver in his voice. "I have no doubt that everything is the best possible in the circumstances!"

"To blazes with yer sarcumstances!" bellowed the offended cook. "What has sarcumstances got to do with that thar meat, an' this hyar coffee, an'—by thunder!—with this hyar *shortcake*?"

And advancing wrathfully upon his dissatisfied guest, he shook the "spider," with its batch of "raisins," rank with the pungent fumes of soda, fairly under his nose.

"Ef this hyar provender hain't to yer blasted dainty notions, whar in seventeen counties will ye find better—*hey?*"

It may be remarked in passing, that all of these men spoke "French" with unprecedented fluency, in the translation of which the spirit rather than the letter may with propriety be rendered.

Without parallel in all her sheltered experience, their sonorous oaths fell like blows upon Abigail's sensitive ear. It seemed to her that to men capable of so awful blasphemy, murder must be the veriest pastime; and she looked to see her lardedah admirer riddled with bullets, or quartered with their huge bowie-knives, before her very eyes!

"Oh, Mr. Cole!" she cried, seizing Hugh's arm, as the one man of her party able to cope with the outlaws, "they will murder Mr. De Morgan!"

"Do not be alarmed," was Hugh's half-smiling reassurance. "That cook is only a clever comedian. De Morgan has unwittingly broken one of the unwritten laws of camp life, and will have to pay the penalty."

"But will you stand and see our dear friend insulted by these wretches?—with a secret satisfaction, I believe, in his humiliation!" cried Mrs. Spike, who hailed the chance to convict Hugh of a meanness in her daughter's eyes.

"Mrs. Spike," he replied, with quiet dignity, "there is a time for everything. This is not the time for interference. When there is serious occasion, I do not think that I shall fail you; but it would be the bight of unwisdom to fritter away such influence as I may have, by giving these men reason to look upon me as a meddler."

Abigail, who stood at Hugh's side, put her hand against his arm with a touch as light as a snowflake.

Meanwhile, the terrified dude was striving plaintively to appease the monster he had roused.

"I beg, my dear sir, that you will not consider my unguarded remark as at all in disparagement of your skill—"

"Skill, Tophet!" roared the implacable demon. "Do you take me for a professional cook? I'll have you to know—blast your eyes!—that I'm a gentleman, an' don't know any more about cookin'—by Judas!—than you do! An' if you don't believe it, roast me if I don't ram it down your infernal throat with the handle o' this hyar spider, an' this hyar dinged coffee-pot on top of it!"

"My dear sir!—my dear sir!" gasped poor Lispinard, "nothing in the world was further from my thoughts than to impugn your character as a gentleman! I am well aware that, with such primitive appliances—"

"Yes, by thunder! You know too blamed much about it! Hang me if I don't believe you are a waiter out o' some New York restaurant, come out hyar to play 'me lawd juke,' an' ketch a gudgeon with a sweet million or two on the matrimonial hook! Why, burn your infested hide! I've ordered *onion hash* from better men than you be, many's the time!"

Poor Lispinard! poor dudy-doo! this to one whose soul had ever revolted from all labor—not to say menial service—as "vulgar!"

Overpowered by this most cruel indignity, he could find no words to reply.

Meanwhile, the raised voice of the offended cook had rung throughout the camp, as he intended; and men came running from every direction, shouting:

"A fight! a fight!"

As they approached, they saw the cook following up his affrighted victim, gesticulating wildly with the frying-pan in one hand and the coffee-pot in the other.

The latter, slopped about with the utmost recklessness, displayed a strange propensity for alighting on the once immaculate person of "ye daintie dude," who avoided its contamination in some degree by skipping about with great agility, if not consummate grace; while every moment threatened to see the soda-exhaling shortcake take flight from the frying-pan.

"Hello, Hank! What's the row?" demanded one of the in-coming spectators.

"This hyar spindle-shanks gags at his grub!" replied the cook, with a long string of profane epithets rained upon the malcontent.

"Maybe he's a pot-swab hisself, bein' as he's

so bekownst what-fur grub a white man ought to eat."

"That's my idee; an'—blast his liver!—he'll have his show fur puttin' up the proper article!"

"That's the ticket! An' bein' as how he's an outsider, an' hain't no call to wag his jaw no-how, but ought to down his gruel with a thank-ye-ma'am, he stands double duty, ye onderstand!"

"You bet!"

"Let up, then, Hank," interposed another. "Ef he stands his racket like a man, you hain't no call to chaw him up."

"He'll stand his racket—don't you sweat!"

And Hank marched over to the fire, and set down the frying-pan and coffee-pot in a very decided manner.

He then proceeded to roll up his sleeves with great nicety and deliberation.

Poor Lispinard shook in his shoes, wondering what penalty was to be inflicted requiring such preparation. Was he expected to "hold up his flippers" before this burly ruffian, to be "knocked out" in four three-minute rounds?

CHAPTER XV.

ABIGAIL TO THE RESCUE.

MRS. SPIKE, convinced that her pet scheme for social advancement would be "knocked in the head" when her dear Lispinard "went to grass," appealed to all of the men of her party in turn to interfere—all but Benoni. She would as soon have thought of enlisting the aid of Abigail, as that of the non-combatant who "cast her vote and held the office which of right belonged to her."

Judge Littlejohn only growled out an unintelligible refusal, and ungallantly turned his back upon her; Hugh calmly assured her that nothing serious was to be apprehended; while Uncle Billy Hodgson was everything that could be desired—except efficient.

"My dear madam!" he cried, as he pressed her hand in both his own, with all the effusiveness of a Frenchman, "I do most heartily sympathize with your distress on this most *painful* occasion! But, ma'am, boys will be boys—*especially this kind o' boys!* Everythin' depends on how ye take 'em. They'll stand at yer back an' knock out anythin' you set before 'em, if you tickle 'em jest whar they like to be tickled; an' the way ye kin *vote* 'em is amazin'! But ef ye sour 'em, they bolt the ticket *every time!*"

"But do somethin'!—do somethin'!" cried the lady.

"The question is, jest what to do," said Uncle Billy, scratching his head reflectively. "As I said before, everythin' depends on how ye take 'em."

"But while you are debatin' that question, they will *murder* dear Mr. De Morgan!"

"Suppose," cried Uncle Billy, looking up quickly, as if he had just conceived a very brilliant idea—"suppose you tell 'em that you're his mother-in-law, an' you won't have it!"

But the Hon. Mrs. Spike had had a sufficient taste of the metal of these rough fellows in the unceremonious celerity with which she had been put into the saddle. She who was ready enough to bully men who were handicapped by deference to her sex, felt her powerlessness with men who were not restrained from physical violence by that sentiment.

Meanwhile the stalwart cook was spitting on his hands and then rubbing them together, as he advanced once more toward the shivering offender.

"Young feller!" he said, affecting the stern gravity of a judge about to pronounce sentence, "thar ain't much law in this hyar section o' country; but what thar is of it is to the p'int! Do ye know what we do with a galoot what blanks the cook?"

"I beg your pahdon, sir! Indeed I did not swear at you!" protested sweet Lispinard.

"Shut up!" was the implacable command.

"Blast ye! don't ye tell me I lie! When Handy Hank slings the pots, you go fur yer rations with both feet in the trough, or you hyear from him! When you blanks the slumgudgeon, you blanks the cook what sets it up. Then what does the cook *he* do?"

"I don't know!"

"The deuce ye don't! Waal, it's time you found out. He walks you Spanish three times round the camp, *he* does! Savvy?"

"I beg your pahdon!"

"Eh?"

But Lispinard, afraid to press for an explanation, said nothing.

"An' what do *you* do?" asked his inquisitor.

"I am at a loss to imagine."

"To Guinea with your imagination! You'll find that it's the red-hottest fact you ever struck, to cook fur forty thieves that eat like these hyar do! You wrastles that thar coffee-pot, an' that thar spider, an' them thar kittles, *you do!*—*fur four days, ye onderstand!*"

"Cook?" cried sweet Lispinard, aghast.

"Why, I never cooked anything in my life!"

"Ye hain't, hey?"

"Never!"

"You'll larn!" said Handy Hank, with conviction.

His positiveness, his brevity, everything showed that there was no appeal. To the elegant, the æsthetic, the beperfumed dudy-doo, this degradation was worse than death.

"I chan't cook! indeed I can't!" he protested, but without hope.

Unmoved, the sturdy outlaw once more spit on his hands, rubbed them together, and advanced.

Lispinard shrunk before him in dismay; but a laughing robber gave him a push that thrust him fairly into Hank's arms; and he was seized in a manner which needs no particular description, and started on his tiptoe march about the camp.

"Fall in! Fall in!" shouted the delighted road-agents.

And the whole roistering mob fell into line behind the executioner and his victim, beating tin pans and canteens, and whistling the Rogue's March.

"No sogerin'!" yelled one of their number. "Every man does his duty. The ladies, they're excused."

And quickly seconded by others who fell in with his humor, he approached the prisoners, who were looking on helpless to relieve their comrade, and pressed cans and sticks upon them.

Of course the Hon. Benoni Spike was afraid to offer the slightest opposition. Truth to tell, he was not particularly averse to paying off some old scores against the popinjay who had so often treated him with superciliousness.

Uncle Billy Hodgson offered only a feeble protest.

"Now, really, boys, this is too bad!"

"A blasted shame, pop! We know that!" laughed the robber who yet thrust a tin plate and a mutton bone into his hands.

But the fellow who assumed the task of whipping Senator Littlejohn into line encountered his stern judicial eye.

"What!" cried that eminent Counselor of State, "do you fancy that I will consent to make myself ridiculous, by participating in your villainous buffoonery?"

"That's the rule o' this hyar camp, boss," replied the road-agent, with a swagger.

The fact was, that under the Olympic lightnings of this old terror of malefactors he was already beginning to lose heart.

"It is evident," said the Judge, with slow scorn, "that you do not know me!"

And coolly turning his back upon the fellow, he walked over to the fire, and proceeded to pour himself another cup of coffee.

Hugh as quietly maintained his dignity, to the not slight satisfaction of Abigail.

"I decline taking any part in this demonstration," he said.

And as he stood with folded arms, looking steadily into the eyes of the men who surrounded him, he was a rock of moral force against which they did not care to batter.

"Oh, this is shameful!" cried Abigail under her breath, seizing his wrist with an unconscious tension of grip.

"Let me lead you to the tent," he said, referring to a canvas structure which afforded seclusion to the ladies. "All this is unfit for you to witness."

"No! no!" she protested, vehemently. "I would not desert my worst enemy under the persecution of these wretches!"

It was the rousing of her woman's championship of unjust suffering.

Suddenly, with the speed of a Diana, she darted across the intervening space, and confronted the cook and his agonized victim.

"Stop!" she cried, for a moment spurred out of her maidenly reserve and timidity by a noble emotion. "Are you men, or cowards, that it takes a score of such burly ruffians to heap insult upon a man who has not a tithe of the strength of any one of you? And how can you, with a spark of generosity or self-respect, descend to such meanness? What has this gentleman done to deserve such treatment at your hands? I am ashamed of you, if you have no shame for yourselves."

She stood before them like a young queen, her cheeks, so recently pale with fear, now bright with the crimson of right royal indignation. How her eyes blazed! How her nostrils quivered! How her bosom heaved! How her voice vibrated with tense scorn!

Swooping down upon him with such fiery impetuosity, she fairly took Handy Hank's breath away.

He let go his hold upon poor Lispinard, and stared at her, mouth agape.

The men stopped their *charivari*, and breaking the line of march, hurried forward to see how their leader would come off in a "chinchoppin' mill" with the spirited young lady.

Handy Hank acquitted himself ingloriously from the first. He was taken completely aback; and before he could recover his self-possession, Abigail took her *protege* by the arm, with a brief:

"Come!"

And indeed she led him out from the midst of the Philistines without opposition.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

FOR the first time Hugh Cole felt a pang of jealousy. If there is anything that will steal into a woman's heart and supplant the glance of a hero, it is the sigh of a martyr.

Of what avail that he face all the Gorgons in her defense, while she sheltered this pretty fledgling under the wing of her woman's pity?

As for the boys, they looked at one another, and then at Handy Hank, and burst into a roar of laughter at his discomfiture.

Then one of them swung his hat, and shouted: "Three cheers fur she! Hip! hip!"

And the tribute was paid with a heartiness and unanimity which showed that Abigail had made conquest of them all.

Even Handy Hank laughed, as the boys proceeded to pelt him with such chaff as their rough wit suggested.

On one side of their nature these rude fellows were like children. They might persecute ruthlessly from sheer exuberance of spirits, without malice. What they sought was, not pain to the butt of their ridicule, but sport for themselves.

Lispinard de Morgan accepted the succor of a woman with the readiness of a mean spirit, glad to escape in any way. Nevertheless he was deeply chagrined at having been so degraded in her sight. He allowed himself to be led away with hanging head, and shrunk from Mrs. Spike's effusive sympathy with some petulance.

Divining his feelings with a woman's quick insight, Abigail drew her mother away, and then strove to set things to flowing in their old channel.

While thus engaged, she was waited upon by Handy Hank, with all his fellows at his back.

The ex-cook doffed his hat respectfully, as he stopped before her, and said:

"You'll excuse me, ma'am, but the boys has laid their heads together over this hyar case, and struck a general average, the which I calls it the handsome thing. We let up on his nibs in the matter o' walkin' Spanish, bein's as you're contrary; but no galoot don't refuse his oats in in this hyar camp, an' git off scot-free. You've got to draw the linesome'er's, an' we draws it at standin' his reg'lar racket—two days' pot-wrastlin'!"

"You mean that Mr. De Morgan must cook for the camp for two days, as the penalty for complaining of his food?"

"That's the size of it, ma'am."

"Very well! It shall be done. And as I too think that the decoction you served as coffee was vile in the extreme, I will incur the same penalty and will assist him."

"That's your own look-out, ma'am."

But when at the following meal Hugh saw her enter upon her duties, he was less acquiescent than Handy Hank.

The outlaws had gathered about to see the lily-fingered exquisite make his first essay at his new office, prepared to gey him mercilessly.

He, as ignorant as a child in such matters, could do nothing but the lifting, under Abigail's direction, and the gingerliness with which he handled the grimy utensils, and the rueful faces he made, convulsed the spectators with laughter.

And now Hugh lost his head.

Jealous of Lispinard, it was but a step to being in a rage with him for precipitating this new complication. He wanted him to pay in the bitter coin of humiliation the full penalty of his infraction of the law of the *cuisine*.

Why should Abigail identify herself with him in this. Could it be that she really cared for him after all?

With a crimson flush on his cheek, the flash of anger in his eyes, and the quiver of it in his voice, he tried to dissuade her.

"He has brought this upon himself by his folly," he said; "and there is no reason why you should share it with him. Let him get out of it as best he can."

The girl looked directly into his eyes with a surprise that angered him the more.

"But he cannot do what they require of him," she said, with a restraint in her voice, the significance of which Hugh did not stop to read.

"So much the worse for him. He should not have got himself in such a predicament. No one else complained, though there are, perhaps, as dainty palates as his."

A dash of color appeared in her cheeks. She dropped her eyes to the ground, and in a still lower voice asked:

"Would you have me desert him entirely?"

"Desert him?" he repeated, catching fiercely at the word, as altogether out of place in connection with one who had no sort of claim upon her. "And why not? Is he any better than any one else?"

Now she lifted her face, suddenly grown pale with still scorn, and gazed steadily at him with that contraction of the eyes which expresses contempt. Her lip curled and quivered in a withering sneer. Her voice, always heretofore so soft and flexible, was now as hard and cold as ice.

"Mr. Cole," she said, "you have strangely misunderstood me—and I you!"

Swiftly she turned to leave him.

Terrified with a sudden nameless panic, the

like of which he had never experienced before, he sprung after her with a single word.

"Abigail!"

Over her shoulder she threw at him a glance that chained him to the spot, and struck down the hand he had extended to detain her.

Then she went back to Lispinard, and busied herself with him as if nothing had happened.

Hugh stood dumb.

And this was the woman he had loved—a veritable tigress, he thought. It did not occur to him that this might be the measure of her love for him; that it was possible she had set him so high above other men, that the discovery that he was only a man after all, with a man's ordinary selfishness, had swung her over to the other extreme.

The fact was that she felt that she had been cheated, as if he had willfully deceived her; and for the moment she despised him from the depths of her soul. How dare such a fraud call her Abigail! Well, it was a blessing that she had detected him in time!

This thought sustained her when other eyes were upon her; but in the still watches of the night, while her mother slept, she lay awake, with streaming eyes and swelling throat.

Hugh was in despair. He could not eat what she had cooked. It would have choked him.

What a dolt he had been! Why hadn't he offered to supplant her, taking upon himself the tasks that had fallen upon Lispinard? The magnanimity of such a course could not have failed to touch her heart and confirm the good opinion she felt sure she had formed of him.

But now all was lost. She ranked him even below the outlaws in meanness, because more intelligent. And he who had so cleverly evaded all the snares spread for him by her mother, had dug this pit with his own hand! She spoke to him in exactly the same tone with which she addressed Judge Littlejohn!

Mrs. Spike was not long in discovering the new turn of affairs, and could scarcely contain her satisfaction.

But other matters pressed upon their attention. The Queen of the Road-Agents, who had been away from the camp for some days, reappeared. Could they learn what disposal she designed to make of them?

To show what her mission had been, and what had come of it, will necessitate a return to the Seat of Government.

CHAPTER XVII.

BETWEEN EMINENT POWERS.

"ARE we returning to barbarism? An unprecedented outrage! The Ruffians of Silver Riffle in open brigandage. Italy and Mexico outdone! The Joint Committee of the Legislature captured and hurried away to mountain fastnesses! A reporter of the *Chronicle* among the victims!"

With such a flourish of trumpets did the *Chronicle* announce to the world the latest sensation, ending with a characteristic toot on his own little horn; since no editor was ever shocked into overlooking an opportunity to tag the name of his paper to any event likely to attract popular attention.

Then followed a graphic description of the capture, every detail of which came from the fertile imagination of a pale and red-eyed young man, who sat at a corner of the sub-editor's table in his shirt-sleeves, at midnight, beneath a flickering gas jet, driving a lead-pencil at lightning speed, and whipping his flagging wits with the fumes of a strong cigar, with the prospect of a whisky-straight as a night-cap when he had filled a stipulated space with entertaining reading matter.

The facts at his command were, that the committee had been forcibly taken from the coach by parties unknown, for a purpose equally unknown.

But it was manifestly impossible to expand so meager an array of facts to fill a column and a half; so the confiding public was informed that there was an organized resistance to the investigation, in which a handful of desperate men threw down the gauntlet to a great and powerful commonwealth. The question was, would the civil authorities be able to cope with this rebellion in miniature, or would it be found necessary to call out the militia?

Out of this romance the enterprising journal "coined money," while the dear public enjoyed a season of agreeable excitement.

Meanwhile His Excellency was closeted with the local Chief of Police, supported by the Head of the Frisco detective force.

The outcome of this putting of official heads together was the secret fitting of a flock of detectives, like birds of the night, under cover of the open dispatching of a posse of officers to the scene of outrage.

They found that Silver Riffle presented the appearance of an informal indignation meeting. Loudly and profanely did the solid citizens repel this libel on the fair fame of the camp. It was even proposed to go up to Frisco and "tear out the lying sheet!"

"We've cleaned out that infernal nest of rat-eaters; an', by thunder! we don't go back on the record!" affirmed Captain Ledyard, as he held his glass suspended on its way to his lips.

"Let 'em send their investigatin' committees, an' be blowed! Ef they come to Silver Riffle, blank 'em! they'll l'arn that when we say that this hyar's a white man's goverment, we mean that it's a *white* man's goverment, b'gum!"

And he "nailed" that proposition by smiting the bar a resounding blow with his fist.

From every side came angry indorsement.

The peculiarly exasperating feature of the slander was that it should be supposed that they would take measures to conceal the fact that they had murdered a score or so of "heathen Chineses!"

A ragged and dirty old tramp—one of the kind that are incessantly drifting about through the mining-regions, "hunting luck"—nudged his neighbor with his elbow, and favoring him with a wink and a knowing grin, made that sound with his tongue which is without name, yet may be designated as the reverse of a chirrup.

"Eh?" ejaculated the man thus addressed.

"Puts it strong, don't he?" chuckled the tramp, thrusting his tongue into his cheek.

"What air you a-tryin' to git through ye?" demanded the other, churlishly.

"Got 'em salted down, I reckon, whar an Ar'tic explorin' expedition wouldn't find 'em!"

And having thrown out this "feeler" in a confidential way, which said "between you and me, pard," he fraternally extended a ragged plug of tobacco from which he had just gnawed a "chaw."

The other received the tobacco, with some softening of manner, but no verbal acknowledgment in the way of thanks, saying:

"Ye're out thar, pard. Some o' the boys might 'a' pulled the hearse fur plunder; but you bet yer boots they never stopped no investigatin' committee."

The tramp grinned and replied:

"That's all right! I'm a stranger an' a good ways from home! Don't give it away! It ain't none o' my funeral, boss."

And he went about his business with the air of a man who "isn't inquisitive."

Nevertheless he was one of the smartest men on the 'Frisco detective force!

The result of his investigations was a dispatch to the effect that, if the capture was the work of the ring-leaders at Silver Riffle, the community at large was not in the secret.

He received in return a dispatch summoning him to the seat of government with all expedition.

A new and unexpected development had transpired.

His Excellency was pacing the floor in sore anxiety, when a lady was ushered into his presence.

The elegance of her attire and the cultivation indicated by her movements had much the same effect upon him that they had not long previous on the gallant Dan Ford; for the Governor's visitor was none other than the Golden Serpent.

"Pray be seated, madam! To what may I owe the honor of this interview?"

"My business is of such a nature as to require strict privacy," replied the lady, glancing at the door which had been left open, and through which His Excellency's private secretary might be seen industriously "driving the quill."

The Governor was a married man and a pillar of the Church. Through his mind flashed an uncomfortable vision of "the ways that are dark and tricks that are vain" of beautiful black-mailers; and with some increase of color in his face, he coughed and fidgeted with embarrassment, while he cast about for some polite way of evading the hint thus thrown out.

The lady seemed to divine his thoughts; for she smiled faintly as she said:

"My business is entirely impersonal, relating to the recent trouble near Silver Riffle."

"I beg your pardon, madam! If you can throw any light on that bold piece of outlawry, you will indeed place me under obligations."

And he went and closed the door.

"Now, madam, anything that you have to communicate—"

"First let us consider another matter."

"Bearing upon our present source of anxiety?" suggested His Excellency, with returning wariness.

"As cause to effect," said the lady.

"Ah!" ejaculated the husband and deacon, softly, beginning to rub his hands with a feeling of comfortable reassurance.

"You have in prison, at San Francisco, a man who rests under the charge of murder."

"We are so unfortunate as to have several in that predicament!"

"The man to whom I refer is named Richard Langley."

"Tiger Dick?"

"That is one of the *sobriquets* by which he is known."

"A ruffian of the wildest life and most abandoned character!" cried His Excellency, with some warmth.

He had recently held the Tiger up as a warning before an assemblage of Sunday-school children. Not that he knew anything about him beyond the exaggerated stories, pure creations of the imagination by men who were paid so much a line to make newspapers *salable*!—

which had set the community agog; but that Dick's notoriety made him an effective figure with which to enforce a lesson in morality.

"A man," suggested the lady, with a quiet incisiveness which brought the color to His Excellency's face, "who had shown an altogether unusual regard for his plighted word!"

"I—I beg your pardon!" stammered the Governor. "I forgot your possible interest in the prisoner. No doubt, all men have their redeeming qualities."

"Which it is so easy to forget in the heat of condemnation."

"It is one of our poor human foibles," admitted the Chief Magistrate, with Christian humility.

"Sir!" said the lady, her eyes kindling, though her voice remained low and sweet, "the law is like a brutal bloodhound which obeys its master's command with remorseless promptness and effectiveness. If you would rescue the victim, you must kill the hound first, and debate the humanities with its master afterwards."

"The bearing of all of which on the case in point—"

His Excellency already began to divine its bearing; but he preferred that his guest should state it in her own way.

"Has it never occurred to you, sir, that a perfectly impartial execution of the law may sometimes destroy better men than those who curb their rascality just enough to keep out of its clutches?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Is it possible that what the world knows of Richard Langley could be true of a man who was so unqualifiedly infamous as a murderer is generally supposed to be?"

His Excellency threw one leg over the other, and rubbed his chin uneasily.

The deacon side of his nature came to the fore, pushing the man-of-the-world side into the background, and face and voice hardened, as he replied:

"After all, a murderer is a murderer!"

"A repentant murderer," urged the lady, "is held to be fit for the Kingdom of Heaven!"

It was needless to ask if he was not, then, by implication, fit to remain on earth.

But this was putting time-honored opinions to an altogether unheard-of use.

"Ahem! ahem!" coughed His Excellency, "that's all very cleverly put; but if we were to let our criminals off so cheaply as that, we should soon have a fine state of affairs."

"You see!" cried the Golden Serpent, with sudden fiery vehemence. "Here is an exemplification of what I have just told you—the necessity of choking off the hound first, lest the victim die in the midst of our debate. You, in common with all men, have one set of rules for theoretical purposes, and a quite different set when it comes to practical action."

"Am I to understand," asked His Excellency, slowly, "that this is the meaning of the capture of the Investigating Committee?"

"Exactly!" replied the Golden Serpent. "It is a demand that you call your hound of the law off of Tiger Dick!"

"A demand embodied in a menace?"

"No less!"

"Of what?"

"Of death to six, as an equivalent for one! And that is cheap! Two of them are women. Tiger Dick is worth six full-grown men!"

"Do you mean to say that, if the prisoner is not released from custody—"

"I mean to say that, if you hang Tiger Dick, on the same day you will receive intelligence where you can find your six friends hanging in a row!"

His Excellency's breath was fairly taken away. Never had he heard so formidable words issue from such sweet lips.

"A desperate set indeed!" he cried, straightening up in his chair, and getting red in the face.

"So desperate," replied the woman, unmoved, "that nothing in heaven or earth will stand in the way of the execution of this purpose!"

"And it was on this that Tiger Dick counted when he made his wonderful display of integrity?" sneered His Excellency.

He had allowed himself to feel a sort of wondering admiration for Dick; and now he was annoyed at the thought that he had been "sold."

"He never dreamed of such a thing!" cried the Golden Serpent.

"He knew that his conscienceless followers would leave no stone unturned to save him from the final penalty of the law."

"And do men put their necks into the hangman's noose on such a chance? Your prejudice blinds you. Besides, Tiger Dick has no followers."

"Then who is it that is making so daring an effort to save him?"

"Look you! Ten days ago I went to Tiger Dick in his prison, and offered to open the iron doors that stood between him and liberty. For men can be bought with money; and if not, the steel is noiseless! What was his reply? 'I am done with crime! I shall go forth from here a free man before the law, or to the gibbet!' You do not know him. I do. He would die as you

would decline a second cup of coffee! And shall such a hero be left to the ignominy of death at the hands of men no ten of whom would dare to stand before him in an open field?"

In her passion the woman had risen to her feet. In keeping with her thought, she gesticulated, unconsciously assuming the imperious attitudes of a queen.

"I!" she cried—"I, all unlooked-for, have taken it upon myself to effect the fulfillment of his requirements. I am here to negotiate with you, as one imperial power with another, for his release, free to walk the streets of San Francisco unmolested. You, and you alone, have the power to cancel his account with the law."

"But you?—who are you?" cried the Governor.

"The Golden Serpent!" replied the woman, looking him fearlessly—nay! proudly, defiantly—in the eye.

"She who is called the Queen of Road-Agents?—a scarcely less noted character than Tiger Dick himself!"

The woman smiled.

"You see that I am fit to treat with you on equal terms," she said.

"But you have put yourself in my power!" cried His Excellency.

"Indeed! Why don't you arrest me, then?"

"I see nothing to hinder me. Even armed, you are but a woman."

"Reflect a moment before you take the world into the secret of your interview with the Queen of the Road-Agents, by summoning some one to arrest her; for of course you do not contemplate such violence with your own hand."

His Excellency bit his lip. Her perfect coolness made him think that he had possibly overlooked some feature of the case.

"Do you think it likely," she asked, "that I would begin my rescue of Tiger Dick by really putting myself in your power?"

For a moment His Excellency had an uncomfortable feeling that this imperturbable outlaw might have a secret force in the Capitol building ready to spring at her call. But that was a little too melodramatic for a prosaic every-day probability.

"Pray explain yourself," he said.

"Is it not plain," replied the woman, "that I am safe so long as I hold your hostages?"

"A simple matter enough, truly. But suppose we were to detain you, and then fight for friends?"

"You could get their dead bodies. Dare you submit such a bargain as that to a sensible world? Let us waste no further time discussing a matter so well assured as my protection from molestation. The question is, do you accept my terms?"

"You do not expect an answer at once—"

"You are at liberty to take as much time to consider as you please. When you have decided, set Tiger Dick free; and your friends shall be returned to you almost before you are prepared to receive them."

"You do not provide for the other contingency."

"I take you to be a sensible man. If not, you will have sensible counselors."

"And this is all?"

"There is nothing left but to say good-morning!"

"Madam, I can but pay tribute to your courage and shrewdness. Would it be an indiscretion, were I to ask if you are the lady for whose sake Tiger Dick placed himself under so curious a pledge?"

The Golden Serpent gasped, put her hand to her heart, and caught at the back of a chair for support. Over her face spread the pallor of death.

"Oh! I beg your pardon!" cried His Excellency, springing forward to save her from falling, if, as seemed imminent, she swooned.

But she waved him off.

"Would to God I were, senor!" she murmured, in a choking voice.

And dropping her veil over her face, she turned toward the door.

"Madam!" cried His Excellency, striding after her. "You will pardon my rudeness?"

He forgot the Queen of the Outlaws in the suffering woman. It was beauty in distress!—beauty, that royalty to which kings do homage! She extended her gloved hand to him in silence, without turning round.

He pressed it, walking with her to the door.

He opened it, and bowed her through as courteously as if she had been the most honored of her sex.

Then it was that he sent his dispatch recalling Detective Sylvester with all expedition.

He came, and found awaiting him an assemblage consisting of all the State Officers, including the Attorney-General, and also the Mayors of San Francisco and Sacramento respectively. Besides these gentlemen, there were a political "boss" and two or three prominent lawyers. Lastly, Jim Farnsworth made one of the party.

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN EXECUTIVE COUNCIL.

CONSIDERING the subject that had called them together, the gentlemen assembled in the

Executive Chamber were in a very cheerful frame of mind.

His Excellency had placed a choice brand of cigars at their disposal; and while they awaited the completion of their number, the Secretary of State and one of the attorneys vied with each other telling stories, to the uproarious mirth of the company.

The appearance of Detective Sylvester was the signal for a transformation.

"Well, gentlemen?" said His Excellency.

And instantly these overgrown boys became grave deliberators.

As concisely as possible the Governor conveyed to them the purport of his interview with the Golden Serpent, concluding:

"And now, what's to be done?"

The company looked to Detectives Farnsworth and Sylvester. The circumventing of rascality was their specialty.

"This confirms my conclusion," said Detective Sylvester, by way of gaining time for reflection, before venturing to suggest any way out of their dilemma. "But the question is, have we gained anything by the change? In one way, it is easier to deal with an isolated band of outlaws than with a whole community like Silver Riffle; but by cutting loose from them, we lose all clew to the whereabouts of our committee?"

"But who is this Golden Serpent?" asked one of the gentlemen. "It seems to me that she is getting to be conspicuous enough of late to be worthy of some attention."

"Undoubtedly!" smiled the detective. "But whose business is it to look after her? If she is in this State to-day, she may be in one of the adjoining territories to-morrow."

"But has she no headquarters to which you can trace her, now that we are sufficiently interested to make it *our* business?"

"We might find a last year's bird's nest or two; but she is probably shrewd enough to get a new *cache* for her hostages."

"Meanwhile," suggested Jim Farnsworth, "she undoubtedly has spies on our movements; and if she finds us cutting the dirt from under her feet, she will be likely to call a halt."

"That is what has seemed to be our vulnerable point," said His Excellency. "She has us so completely at her mercy."

"To sacrifice our friends for the pleasure of stretching the neck of this vagabond would seem to me a very poor bargain," said the State Treasurer.

"Then we are to accede to her terms?" asked His Excellency. "What do you say to that, Mr. Attorney?"

And he looked toward the Attorney-General with a questioning smile.

"I see that you are plotting to make me a party to your compounding a felony!" laughed the officer appealed to.

"Aren't you the natural defender of the Constitution?" asked one of his fellow-members of the bar.

"I try to take good care of my own constitution," replied the commonwealth's judicial champion.

"Meanwhile, it would be a pity to spoil such a good constitution as Uncle Billy's," suggested the Secretary of State. "If it comes to a question between his constitution—not to mention those of the others—and the State's, I vote for Uncle Billy, every time!"

"Of course," said His Excellency, gravely, "we have precedent for the waiving of formalities in an exigency of this kind."

"There is one other consideration perhaps worthy of note," said the District Attorney. "It is by no means certain that we could make a case against the prisoner."

"Eh? I thought it clear enough," said His Excellency. "I remember reading the details at the time."

"We might establish his guilt morally," said the Prosecuting Attorney; "but to fix it upon him legally is a different thing. To begin with, our principal witness is dead."

"But was there no deposition taken?"

"Unfortunately, that was destroyed in the great fire."

"But the general testimony still accessible? In so simple a case—"

"As a drunken brawl! Who can tell who has done anything, except an actual eye-witness?"

"And there is none such in this case?"

"No one. It is even possible that the Tiger is not the guilty man. His claim is that he was drunk, like the rest; and he doesn't know what he may have done. If we put him on trial as the case stands, the chances are that he will get off with murder in the second degree at most, and probably with manslaughter."

"If such is the case, it is reason enough why we should not hesitate," said the State Treasurer.

It was plain that all were of the same mind. The maintenance of law was of eminent importance; but then, the committee was composed of their personal friends.

After a little further desultory discussion, it was agreed that the Chief Magistrate should pledge the Commonwealth to grant Tiger Dick a full pardon for all past offenses whatsoever, on the restoration of the committee.

"So your two years' persevering pursuit goes up in smoke!" said one of the gentlemen to Jim Farnsworth.

"Hardly," returned the detective, serenely. "I followed Tiger Dick with the purpose of bringing him to book. If you gentlemen choose to let him go after I have caged him for you, that's none of my funeral."

"He very narrowly escaped providing you with a funeral of your own, I understand."

"For which I bear him no grudge. He did it in a fair and open fight. But, gentlemen, there is one thing which you have overlooked in making your arrangements."

"And that is?"

"Tiger Dick himself."

"Eh?"

"Isn't he a party to this transaction?"

"But not difficult to please with the present arrangement, I imagine!"

"You don't know him."

"What?"

"Suppose he should refuse to accept his release on such conditions?"

"But anything so absurd is unsupposable!"

"I should think that few men would hesitate about taking their neck out of the hangman's noose," seconded another.

"But haven't you had evidence that Tiger Dick isn't an ordinary man?" asked Jim Farnsworth. "How many men, in the circumstances, would have made such a bargain with me, instead of tapping me on the head? He could have done it with impunity."

"We don't half-appreciate the peculiar code of honor that obtains among these semi-civilized mountaineers," observed one of the lawyers, who plumed himself on his varied information. "They are not unlike the old feudal lords."

"But I understand that it was more especially the influence of a woman, in this particular case, who seems to have effected a change of heart in this dashing outlaw in more respects than one."

"And while he puts his head into the noose for one woman, here comes along another who is anxious to put hers in along with his!" cried His Excellency. "They're a passionate lot, truly!"

"Don't you see a possible stumbling-block for your plans here?" asked Farnsworth.

"How so?"

"Why, will the Tiger be willing to go to lady-love number one with so peculiar an obligation to lady-love number two?"

"Well! well! now that I think about it," cried His Excellency, "there was some such point raised. But the issue was joined a little differently. Our reformed outlaw refused to escape under the continued stigma of the law. It seems to have been agreed between them, however, that he would accept the obligation to his deliverer if only his release was made complete."

"I may be wrong, but I think the Golden Serpent misunderstood the Tiger. I have talked with him during his incarceration, and his point is that he is done with crime. He refuses to profit by it. This is the change that his love for Miss Holyoke has wrought in him."

"Well, now!" cried the Secretary of State, enthusiastically, "such a fellow as that has some good in him! I, for one, am glad that we have found a better use for him than hanging."

"But you seem to forget that this will be profiting by a crime."

"Ah! that's so! But won't that be a queer kind of obstinacy to overcome? He has gone to the other extreme, and from being an unconscionable outlaw, has become too virtuous for this wicked world!"

"Let us not anticipate difficulties," suggested the Attorney-General, dryly. "I have yet to see a man whose logic isn't more or less affected by self-interest. I fancy that we can convince him that this is consistent with his new-found virtue."

"It is so interesting a case," said His Excellency, "that I propose to give you all a chance to see how he receives it. I will have him brought here, and the matter shall be submitted to him in your presence."

"Good! good!" cried all the company.

A telegram brought the Tiger to the capital city by the first train, and the disposers of his fate were reassembled for his reception.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TIGER MAKES TERMS.

TIGER DICK entered the Executive Chamber with his right wrist linked to the left of a burly officer by a bright steel handcuff.

He compared with his custodian about as a greyhound with a bulldog.

"Be gorra!" whispered the political "boss" to the gentleman standing next him, "but he's a beauty, so he is! He'd strip handsome for the ring! I wish I had the likes of him in my ward."

Other men present, of greater refinement, recognized in the prisoner no hang-dog ruffian, but one so manifestly their peer in everything that constituted a man and a gentleman, that they could not but treat him with respect.

He walked with the quiet dignity which was

natural to him, as free from affectation as it was from carelessness.

These men of the world could not but admire the fine poise of his head, the clear light in his eye, his perfect self-possession.

Involuntarily the Governor rose to his feet, as he would receive a guest. But he had the self-command to check the impulse there.

At sight of Dick Jim Farnsworth started to his feet, with a look of surprise and a flush of annoyance.

"There has been an oversight here," he said. "It is not necessary to fetch Tiger Dick into this presence in such a manner. Mr. Officer, pray put Mr. Langley more at his ease."

Tiger Dick bowed his acknowledgment of this mark of consideration, as the cuff was forthwith removed.

"And now, Mr. Langley," said His Excellency, when Dick was seated, "have you received any intimation as to why you have been summoned here?"

"None whatever, sir," replied Dick.

"You are informed of the recent capture of a committee of the Legislature on its way to investigate the Chinese troubles at Silver Riffle?"

"I have read of the occurrence in the newspapers."

"Can you throw any light on the matter?"

"I? In what respect?"

Every eye was upon the Tiger. They saw the quick look of surprise that appeared in his face at this pointed question.

"He's a first-class actor, and prepared for this inquisition; or he is innocent of collusion in the matter," whispered the Attorney-General to the Governor.

"You think so?" asked His Excellency.

"I would stake my reputation on it."

"Wait! Let's see if I can't corner him."

"Go in!"

"Pardon me!" said His Excellency. "But are we wholly unjustified in assuming that your past life may have given you some familiarity with the possible perpetrators of such an—I can but say outrage!"

A flush rose to Tiger Dick's brow; but he was not abashed by the centering of all eyes upon him.

"You are, no doubt, justified in such an assumption," he said, with grave, sad dignity. "Not only that; but my past life gives you a warrant for addressing such language to me, and leaves me without just complaint. However, you are mistaken in this particular instance. I know nothing of the men of Silver Riffle."

It was His Excellency's turn to flush under the reproof so cleverly administered.

He bit his lip. It seemed absurd to apologize to a man of Tiger Dick's admitted antecedents.

It occurred to him that the Golden Serpent was right, in saying that we were not quite ready to reinstate on earth the repentant sinner whom we assured of his reception into the courts of Heaven amid the acclaim of angelic hosts.

"If you know nothing of the actors in this particular case," he said, "can you not offer some suggestion pertinent to cases of this kind, which will throw some light on the possible motives of these men?"

"Why, I understood that it was a revolt against inquisition," said the Tiger, his looks evidence of his sincerity.

"What did I tell you?" asked the Attorney-General, under his breath.

"I believe you are right," returned His Excellency, in the same guarded tone.

"Right!" muttered the lawyer, with a twinkle in his eye. "Ain't I always right?"

"That is the newspaper version of the affair," said His Excellency, aloud; "but our investigations do not substantiate such a view."

The Tiger's eyes brightened with increasing interest.

"There is the other motive of capture for ransom," he suggested.

"A rather un-American proceeding—would it not be?"

"True. But what use could a roving band of men make of a promiscuous company, men and women? Personal revenge could not extend to all of them, brought accidentally together, except in their character of a committee. If they had been killed, that would have been one thing. But why hold them alive, unless with a view to profit?"

"That has been suggested," said His Excellency, without change of countenance. "If it is the correct explanation, when, in your opinion, should we look for some overtures of settlement from the bandits?"

"First, they would get their prisoners in a place of undoubted safety. They would probably spy upon your movements, to see if there was any likelihood of you piping them home. Assured on that score, they would wait an opportunity to communicate with the friends of their hostages in a way which would give no clew. I should expect them to try to negotiate with the parties directly and to the exclusion of officers of the law. Of course, this is so entirely contingent upon circumstances that no time could be assigned. Forty-eight hours might do it; and it might extend over weeks, according to their caution or their opportunities."

Tiger Dick could not have made stronger the impression of his perfect ingenuousness than his manner did.

However, the Governor had one more test.

"Mr. Langley," he said, with sudden directness, "we have received an intimation of the perpetrators and their motives."

"Ah?" replied Dick.

And his looks showed that he felt that, for some reason, he had been trifled with.

"The captor is the Golden Serpent," said His Excellency.

Tiger Dick started. Then he looked from face to face. He saw that every eye was reading his countenance.

He flushed and rose to his feet with haughty indignation in looks and bearing.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the motive of this woman is plain to me, as also your purpose in this inquisition. But both you and she are mistaken! I am not a party to her effort to effect my release—which proves *your* mistake; and I will not profit by it—which proves *hers*. If, after what has passed between us in the last few days, Mr. Farnsworth yet hesitated to assure you of my non-acceptance of a release so procured—"

But loyal Jim Farnsworth had leaped to his feet.

"I did not, Dick!" he cried, hurrying forward with extended hand. "I said from the first that it was no—go!"

"He at least," continued Dick, without break, "could have told you that, in dealing with me, nothing was to be gained by indirection. Is it not plain to you that the capture of the committee was the success of the plot? Then, if I were in it, why should I hesitate to avow my complicity?"

By this time Jim Farnsworth had him by the hand with both his own, and insisted upon being heard first.

"Dick!" he cried, "you in your turn should need no assurance that I was not in this underhand business. Haven't I always dealt with you on the square? I never dreamed that you was to be put through the mill like this, until the thing was done."

In these words was His Excellency treated to an altogether new sensation. Here were a rogue and a rogue-taker holding him up to reproach as a man of devious methods! What was the world coming to, when gentlemen of their kidney took the highest in the commonwealth to task on a point of honor?

But then His Excellency was too thorough a politician to allow his temper to get the upper hand of him.

"Pardon me!" he said, with a quietly sarcastic smile. "But, admitting that yours is a somewhat exceptional case, you will not hold me to too strict an accountability for my error of judgment. I promise to be frank enough with you for the future."

"To begin with, then, the Golden Serpent has offered us an exchange of prisoners; and we have concluded to liberate you with a clean record. You will be detained—Stay! I will show that what I have seen of you has not been altogether lost on me. From this moment you are released on parole, to bind you only until we have assurance of the safety of our committee."

"You forget," said the Tiger, quietly, "that I have refused to return to the world through such means."

"But, my dear sir!" cried His Excellency, "is not this a super-refinement of sentiment? You have had no share in bringing this about. I am sure that these gentlemen will join me in testifying so much to the world, if that will satisfy your scruples."

Tiger Dick smiled as he looked about on the acquiescent faces.

"I leave such evasions to those brought up in the subtleties of the law!" he said, with a bow which included them all.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the Secretary of State, who, having no legal affiliations, was out of range of this thrust—"got you there, boys!"

The lawyers laughed good-naturedly.

"You gentlemen of so extraordinary punctiliousness," replied one of them, "would fare hard, if we didn't occasionally get you off on some fine point!"

"And do you mean to say," cried His Excellency, "that you would rather hang than not?"

"I mean to say," replied Tiger Dick, gravely, "that the old life is behind me. I mean to say that, seven months ago, I pledged myself to add nothing further to my all-too-long list of crimes, but to do something to reclaim the past, if there was virtue in sincere repentance. I had received my reward in advance. Do you fancy that, having accepted it, I would go back on the agreement?"

All understood that this was an allusion to the woman's love that had given him a new purpose in life.

None present was so careless as not to respect this stand. For the first time in their lives they began to see how it was that true repentance was a thing of such great significance. Here was a man lifted in their esteem, in spite of them, from the depths of infamy to a place among honorable men; and all because he had

experienced a change of heart which was palpable to them.

Two or three of them were members of the Church—His Excellency, for one, as we have seen. None of them had ever quite realized that the repentance of even a murderer could have so purifying and elevating an effect as this that they now saw before them. It had heretofore been to them a matter of words, which they had repeated mechanically until they had no real live meaning.

"Then it seems that we are at a stand," said His Excellency, making no further effort to shake Tiger Dick's resolve. "But how will the Golden Serpent receive this? She has impressed me as a lady of strong determination and rather passionate impulsiveness. Suppose she flies in a temper, and vents her disappointment on our friends?"

"But how unreasonable," cried one of the gentlemen, "when we are in no way to blame for the failure of her scheme!"

"Unreasonable!" repeated His Excellency, recalling the Golden Serpent's outburst. "If you had been privileged to see her, you would agree with me that she is a person not wholly amenable to reason."

"I'll tell you what to do," said the Mayor of Frisco.

"I wish you would," said His Excellency, turning to him as a last resort.

"Give her permission to argue her case with this gentleman. If she can induce him to follow her, he is hers; if not—why, she will associate her failure more directly with him."

"That's the best thing that seems to offer," said His Excellency, not wholly relieved of his anxiety. "But lest she should take it into her head to do something desperate, there should be some provision for having her followed, so that there might be help at hand in case of necessity."

A general discussion followed, in which every one offered what occurred to him.

Tiger Dick had been standing aloof, his thoughts wandering away to that little bay in the Gulf of Lower California where his heart was.

Suddenly his face lighted up, and he started hurriedly toward the group of counselors, breaking abruptly in upon their discussion.

"Gentlemen!" he cried, "I have something to offer which has just occurred to me, as if by inspiration!"

"We are willing to accept almost anything," said His Excellency.

"My proposition is this. I know a lot of fellows who are under the ban of the law, whom I should like to be the means of reinstating among honest men. Will you extend the mantle of executive clemency to them, if I will call them to my aid, and not only recover your friends, but break up the band of the Golden Serpent? They are road-agents, the whole lot of them. One proviso before you decide. If I capture the Golden Serpent, I must be free to restore her liberty. I can't hand over to the law one who has shown herself so anxious to serve me."

"Let me say a word!" cried Jim Farnsworth. "Take Dick up without any if's or and's; but stipulate that I shall be allowed to go with him!"

His Excellency smiled at the eagerness of the detective, who promised to be as enthusiastic an ally as he had so long been a stubborn antagonist.

"I accept," he said, "without any if's or and's, and with only the stipulation you petition for, if it is agreeable to Mr. Langley."

"It is!" said Dick, with marked satisfaction. "In this way, gentlemen, I feel that I can honorably earn the pardon of the State! It will be something to put two-score men once more in the right track."

"I wish you every success!" said His Excellency, extending his hand.

He was moved to it by seeing that the thing Dick attached importance to, was the being able to make other men sharers in his reformation.

Tiger Dick flushed scarlet. Never before had he felt his real position as he was now made to feel it by this one little act of genuine humanity.

"Wait! wait!" he said, stepping back, and actually putting his hands behind him. "I have done nothing as yet!"

"As you will," said His Excellency, understanding his scruples!

The Tiger hurried to the details of his plan, that he might escape from this embarrassing situation.

"It must not be known," he said, "that I am out of prison. Let the Golden Serpent think that you are still deliberating over her proposition. I will go in disguise."

"The trick will be to keep the reporters at bay," said Jim Farnsworth. "If one of them smells out our little game, he will have it all dished up in the papers in an hour's time."

"You can be taken back to San Francisco to-day openly, and be smuggled out to-night."

"But when they come round for their regular interview?" asked Farnsworth, with a wry face expressive of his disgust at the prying of the newsmongers.

"They can be sent to the right-about, with the intelligence that for State reasons there is to be no more interviewing for the present."

"They've cut out a large pattern for you, my boy!" said Farnsworth, turning with a laugh to Prison Warden Dan Ford.

"Let 'em come!" said Dan. "They'll find we're enough for the best of 'em!"

"Don't you be too sure. They say that one of 'em actually got in to His Satanic Majesty, and asked him for some points on the situation down below. There's an awkward end to the story, though. He got in, and got his points; for the devil himself couldn't head him off, once he started in to questioning him. He got in, as I said; but the trick was to get out. That stumped even a reporter. He's down there yet!"

So Tiger Dick was taken back to prison as he came; but that night he was a free man, his mission begun.

Would he succeed? Would he win his way back among honorable men?

CHAPTER XX.

A REPORTORIAL FERRET.

JUST before he set out on his new mission, Tiger Dick received a letter which made his heart leap. It was needless to look at the postmark, to guess that it was from Lower California.

Its dainty chirography was equaled only by its delicacy of thought and expression.

There was no "gush" in it. Its terms of endearment, few and the reverse of extravagant, occurred only where it seemed as if the writer had used them involuntarily and almost unconsciously.

Down in one corner, written so fine as to be scarcely legible, he found the outreaching of a great yearning tenderness:

"If you only knew!"

When he saw that, he dropped his face upon the letter, in an ebullition of ungovernable emotion.

When he lifted his head again, his countenance was irradiated. If he did not know all the love she hinted at so shyly, it is safe to say that he guessed enough to fill his cell with golden sunshine.

"This," he cried, "shall be my inspiration! With such a goal in view, I could cut my way single-handed through an imperial army!"

While this exaltation was yet upon him, Jim Farnsworth appeared with his disguise.

A few minutes later they passed from the prison.

"Hallo, Farnsworth!" cried a happy-go-lucky voice, as they were going out. "Just the man I want to see! You fellows have stolen a march on me. What was this flitting to Sacramento and back? Every item about the redoubtable Tiger Dick is worth its weight in gold, you know."

And a young man with his hat set carelessly on the back of his head, a stray lock of hair falling over his forehead, his necktie in a loose knot just ready to fall apart, and having a general air of Bohemian negligence, seized the detective by the hand, while he drew some loose slips of paper from his pocket.

"I haven't time to bother with you now, Sam," said Farnsworth, trying to brush by the reporter. "You'll have to strike Ford. He hasn't anything else to do; and he'll fill you full."

"Oh, I say! what's yer hurry? Hang Ford—I'm at the outs with him. Give me the greatest lot of rot you ever heard. I'll trot along down the street with you. Won't keep you a minute, if you're in such a desperate rush."

"But I tell you, man, I'm 'going somewhere,' and it's a business trip; so don't bother!"

"See you in an hour—any place you set!"

"I sha'n't be free in an hour."

"Ta-ta, then! Wish you luck. Dan's better than nothing. Hang him! if he gives me guff, I'll get square with him somehow!"

The reporter cast a sharp look at the disguised Tiger, and then nodded and winked at Farnsworth.

He set out with a rush for Dan Ford, while Tiger Dick and Jim Farnsworth made their exit into the street.

The door had scarcely closed behind them when, clapping his hand to his pocket, Sam Briton cried:

"There I go again! Didn't give him those passes after all! What's the good of a head, if you don't have it about you at the right times?"

And with this bit of philosophy on his lips he rushed headlong after the departing detective.

He gained the exterior of the prison just in time to see a gust of wind whisk Tiger Dick's hat from his head.

The hat was of less consequence; but the mischief was done by its carrying a wig with it!

"Into the carriage with you!" cried Jim Farnsworth. "I'll get your hat!"

Without a word Tiger Dick plunged headforemost into a waiting coach.

The lamps before the prison threw their light over the Tiger's back. By it Sam Briton saw the contour of his head.

"Eh? By the piper that danced before Moses!" he cried under his breath.

His first impulse was to rush forward and probe the mystery before the parties to it could recover.

But the door of the carriage went to with a bang, and told him that he was too late.

His next thought was to himself evade detection; and he slipped out of sight before either the Tiger or Jim Farnsworth turned to see him.

"Look here, Barney!" cried Jim Farnsworth to the coachman, "if you blow anything you may have seen, you'd better look out for yourself!"

"Is it the likes o' me that's given to gabblin', Musther Farnsworth?" asked the jehu, with an injured air.

"It's all right, if you don't. But I tell you there's more in this than you think."

"You may count on me, sor."

"See that you don't fail me!"

"Divil a word, sor."

"That's a pretty go!" laughed the Tiger, as Farnsworth appeared at the carriage door with his hat and wig.

"It's lucky for us that no one was passing."

"Didn't some one come out of the jail, or go in? I thought I heard the door."

"No. It's all quiet there," said Jim Farnsworth, looking in the direction indicated.

"Then there's no harm done."

"Not this time; but it won't do to try the thing often. After the brush with that infernal reporter, it made me feel nervous."

"They're a precious lot!" laughed Dick. "The world must have been a slow place before their day and generation."

"And now what?" was the reflection of Sam Briton. "No use in running after the carriage. But it will boom the Briton stock if I can get at it. Must make the riddle somehow; but how? Was it, or wasn't it? Soon settle that question, anyway. Here goes for feeler No. 1!"

He tore down the hall to the warden's office.

Nobody there but a turnkey balancing on the hind leg of his chair, while industriously filling a pipe with tobacco.

"Hallo! Where's Dan?"

"Out."

"Evidently. But where?"

"Give it up."

"How long has he been gone?"

"Don't know."

"When will he be back?"

"I'll never tell ye."

"I say! you ain't very well posted, are you?"

"Nary."

"Is there any way to get in to Tiger Dick to-night?"

"When Ford comes back."

"I knew that before. But before he comes back?"

"Nixy."

"Anything new?"

"Not as I knows on."

The reporter turned to leave this unpromising subject.

"By the way," he said, over his shoulder, "where's Fadden?"

"To grub."

Briton went out in disgust.

During the following day Dan Ford was nowhere to be met with.

"Hang me if there ain't something in this!" was Sam Briton's conclusion.

At last he cornered the warden.

"Where in the deuce have you been this dog's age? Raked the whole town for you."

"You didn't happen to strike the right place at the right time—that's all."

"So it seems. But now I've caught on, everybody's hungry for more Tiger Dick. Don't keep the public waiting any longer, my dear sir."

"No go!" said Ford, laconically, over the top of his paper.

"Eh?" asked the reporter, his suspicions at once on the alert.

"Why is Tiger Dick like the Czar?" asked Ford, as if he were propounding a conundrum.

"Give it up. Why is he?"

"Because he isn't giving any audiences."

"What's that? Why not?"

"For State reasons."

"Do you mean to say—"

"What I said at the beginning. No go!"

"What's in the wind, Dan?" asked Briton, lowering his voice to a confidential pitch.

"How do I know?" asked Ford, innocently. "I obey orders. They send down from headquarters—'No more Tiger Dick. Too much of him already?' That fixes me."

And the most subtle cross-examination could worm nothing further out of him.

"It was the Tiger, and no mistake!" cries the reporter to himself, when forced to retreat baffled from the reticent warden. "But what's the meaning of it? Where have they taken him to, and why? Must unearth it somehow. Worth its weight in gold! There's Fadden. I'll work him for all he's worth."

Inquiry proved that that was Fadden's "day off."

"Good enough! Couldn't be better!" was the reporter's self-felicitation.

An hour later he had found the turnkey, and had plied him with liquor until the most beautiful fraternal relations were established between them.

In strictest confidence Fadden imparted all the information he had.

To the fact that Tiger had been taken to the Capitol, and in pursuance of some conference there—from which, of course, the turnkey had been excluded, and of the purport of which he was therefore ignorant—had left the jail in company with Jim Farnsworth, he added the names of the gentlemen he had seen assembled in the Executive Chambers.

All these things Briton jotted down the moment he was free from the man he had pumped dry.

"The next point is to find out what went on in that meeting."

He ran over the names on his list.

"State officers, Mayors of Sacramento and Frisco, Boss Madden, District Attorney, and these king legal sharks! What does it all mean? Something crooked, I'll be bound! What could he take counsel with such a mixed crowd for? They're all 'way up in the mines. Something unusual, sure. What is it?—that's the sticker."

Scratching his head was productive of no further light.

At last he rushed off as if struck by a new and brilliant idea.

"No other way," he reflected. "Risky, but must get at the facts!"

And reaching the vicinity of a popular theater, he plunged into a dark alleyway, and soon effected an entrance through the stage door.

CHAPTER XXI.

BY WAYS THAT ARE DARK.

"HALLO, little one!" was Sam Briton's salutation to a gayly-decked actress who had just come through the wings. "Do you know?—you are outdoing yourself! That last was a screamer! Hear 'em roar! In you go again! What a dunder-head I am, not to have brought a bouquet myself! But the neglect is no sign of a wane in my affections—just remember that! Petite Margot, I'm more in love with you every day! You've the voice of an angel, and no mistake! There, there! in you go!"

"You're a silly!" responded Miss Margot, with a flash of her bright eyes over her shoulder at him, as she hurried back upon the stage in response to the manager's impatient snarl at her flirting when she ought to be attending strictly to business.

Unabashed, Briton made up to the autocrat of this mimic world.

"I say, Griffith! Have to give you a little puff on this piece. Haven't had a thing run so smoothly for a dog's age. How you keep these vixens in order, hanged if I can see! A hundred and fifty women!—whew!"

"With the help of a few such fellows

as you it's easy enough," replied Griffith, turning the edge of his sarcasm with a smile, however.

"Any points?"

But the manager had turned to swear at some one who was out of order; and Sam got where he could look through the wings at the divinity who was receiving the popular homage in the shape of thunders of applause and a shower of bouquets.

With her eyes flashing, her cheeks flushed, her lips parted, and her bosom rising and falling with the quick respiration of excitement, she retreated to the wings, bowing her acknowledgments, and then with a quick turn came her reportorial admirer, holding an exquisite bouquet to her nose.

Sam shook his fist at her as she approached.

"Did that come from the right-hand box?" he asked in a whisper, as soon as she was near enough.

"What if it did?" she asked, with a coquettish toss of her head, holding the bouquet close to her bosom and once more plunging her nose into it.

"I'll go out and hang myself forthwith!" affirmed Sam, melodramatically.

"Don't!" she enjoined upon him.

"Would you care?" he asked, with a sudden thrill of tenderness in his voice.

She gave him a quick flash of her eyes and was about to hurry away, when he caught her hand and said:

"And yet, you receive his bouquets, and—"

"Don't be a goose, Sam!" she interrupted. "He's my angel—you know that well enough. Where should I be if he hadn't put up the money?"

"Hang his money, and him with it!" growled Sam.

"With all my heart, if you can replace it," responded the actress.

"You know I would if I could."

"But seeing you can't, what's the use of teasing? Come, Sam! that's a good boy."

She squeezed his hand and smiled coaxingly into his eyes.

"One minute. I want to see you," he urged, still detaining her.

"After the next act. I haven't another second to spare now!"

And she flitted away like a fairy.

The reporter was prompt at the appointment; and having got this queen of the tinsel realm in seclusion, he opened his project forthwith.

"Marg', I want you to strike that muff for a bit of news."

"Now, are you going to be cross and call names?" she asked, with a pretty pout.

"Well, this is pretty rough on a fellow, you know."

"I know; but then, it can't be helped. Do you fancy that *you're* the only one that has anything to put up with?"

She took both his hands, rose on tip-toe, threw her head back until her chin was in a straight line with her smooth white throat, pursed up her lips, and so wooed him to happiness in the present, regardless of the future.

So posed, she made a picture that would have won an anchorite from his ascetic vows.

With a hurried glance to make sure that they were beyond the range of observation, Sam bent and kissed her.

She drew his arm about her, and nestling close to him, asked:

"When you *know* so well, can't you try to be content?"

"You're going to supper with him to-night?"

"I must!"

"Suppose I say not, Margot?"

"Well, if I thought that you cared very much— Only it would be losing everything, dear!"

"Still, if I insisted?"

The girl did not answer directly. She looked very grave. He could feel her tremble in his arms with apprehension.

She looked up into his face anxiously, inquiringly. Did he mean it? Had it come to the issue of losing him, or putting aside her ambition to success in her profession?

Her eyes became humid, and there was a husky tremor in her voice, as she whispered:

"But you won't, dear? You wouldn't stand in my way like that? I *so* long to get on; and now is my chance. It takes money

to buy popularity; and some one must furnish it."

So she was willing to sacrifice her prospects to his happiness.

Sam asked himself whether he would have done as much for her, and was forced to answer—*not a tithe!* In the face of such disinterestedness, he was somewhat ashamed of the use to which he was putting her love.

"Well, we won't talk about that now," he said.

"No!" she responded, brightening at once, and smiling caressingly into his face.

"I want you to do something for me."

"You know, dear, that I am never so happy as when I am doing what will please you."

"But it's dog's work that I'm going to put you to. Confound the luck! Why is it that the coat is stripped off one man's back, to give to another who already has two? Why are some people forced to go through the world kissing the hand of those they long to kick?"

"Never mind, Sam! What is it you want me to do? Don't think of the disagreeable part of it."

"That fellow was up at the Capitol day before yesterday, in consultation with the Governor and a lot of the bosses, and some move was taken with reference to Tiger Dick. The upshot of it is that he's out of jail. Now it will be the making of me at head-quarters, if I can open up their little secret. There's no way but through him; and I want you to help me."

"But, dear, he never speaks of such things to me."

"I should say not! But a woman can coax anything out of a man that she really wants to know."

"But if it is a state secret, Sam, how can I approach him?"

"I leave that to your ingenuity. The thing is, to find out, by hook or by crook, what is being done with the Tiger."

"It will be so easy to evade a true answer, even if he doesn't laugh the matter off without pretending to gratify me. If you were to be misled in that way, Sam, wouldn't it be worse than silence for you? And it would betray us both. He would know how you came by it."

"But there must be no such fiasco as that."

"How can I tell?"

"Get him garrulously drunk and then worm the truth out of him without letting him see what you're after."

The girl looked uneasy.

"Well, will you risk it?" asked the reporter.

"I wasn't thinking of the risk, Sam."

Indeed, it was the treachery that troubled her.

"What then?" he asked, a little sullenly.

"I will do the best I can," she replied, evading his question.

She spoke very quietly. There was no reproach in look or tone, but all the vivacity was gone out of her manner.

"Hang the thing!" muttered the reporter to himself. "It's the dirtiest job I ever did, by Jove. But then, it's a dirty world, take it all round; and one can't afford to be nicer than one's neighbors when one has one's bread to earn."

Their parting was without the usual light-hearted demonstrations of affection on the part of his sweetheart; and on the following day, when she gave him the information she had gleaned, she was restless and sad.

She made no reference to the means she had used to lead this man of public eminence to betray his trust.

Sam tried to express his gratitude, but his caresses were as mechanical as his words, and she received them passively.

He was glad to get out of her sight, and she was glad to have him go.

Over the feelings that remained to them, he swore, and she wept.

That night the streets of the Occidental metropolis rung with the secret.

Sam Briton received an intimation from "head-quarters" that a young man of his enterprise was a fair candidate for promotion when opportunity should offer.

But what was the result which bore most directly on the fortunes of those most deeply affected?

The sensational news spread like wildfire.

In remote mining-camps the enthusiasm of adventure-loving men was stirred by the story of Tiger Dick's road to honor.

But when the Golden Serpent learned of it she turned pale as death.

"So!" she cried, with dilating nostrils, "they have betrayed me! Well, let them learn how I can revenge such faithlessness!"

But there was another who had seen the indiscreet publication—no less a person than Don Giacomo.

"At last! at last!" he cried, clutching the paper so fiercely as to tear it. "The opportunity for which I have waited an eternity. Ah! *gracias a Dios!* the hour has come! Now for my revenge! I have not watched and waited for nothing!"

He had twenty-four hours the start of the Golden Serpent!

CHAPTER XXII.

A NEW DEAL.

AWAY into the mountains rode Tiger Dick and detective Jim Farnsworth.

"Dick," said his companion, watching the joyous light on the other's face, "for the hundredth time I congratulate you! I never knew any one that I wished better luck than I do you. You've always been as square as a die, whatever card was up. And I don't mind saying that I'm half in love myself with the woman who has wrought such a change in you."

Dick made no direct reply to this, but the light glowed warmer in his eyes.

"It isn't the easiest thing in the world that we have undertaken," he said, slowly.

"You bet it ain't!" responded the detective.

"I'm not afraid but that we can bag the Golden Serpent and her gang easy enough."

"I'd go it blind on that!"

"But suppose she gets wind of our move before we close in on her?"

"And in her tantrum concludes to take it out of her prisoners!"

"That's the mischief! I was so taken up with my own interests in the matter, that I didn't think of that while I was making the proposal."

"It's got to be thought of now. What can be done?"

Dick did not answer. His brows contracted thoughtfully as he rode on.

"There must be some way of securing them before we show our hand," he said, presently. "I should never rest if harm came to any of them, as the price of my liberation."

"Dick, you're a white man!" cried Jim Farnsworth, with enthusiasm.

Coming out of his reverie, Tiger Dick turned and looked at the speaker inquiringly.

"What now?" he asked.

"Why, it ain't every one who would be so tender of others, so long as they saved their own bacon."

"Remember, I refused an arrangement which would guarantee their perfect safety. If harm comes to them now, I shall be responsible for it."

"What do you propose to do?"

"I don't know yet. Some way I shall make sure of the safety of the prisoners first, and then strike for my game."

"Have you any idea where they are?"

"Not yet. It's like hunting for a needle in a haystack. But then something is sure to turn up. Something always does turn up."

It was the old faith in his destiny which was a relic of his gambler's life.

"Jim," he said, later, "I shall have to leave you at a safe distance while I go for my men. I want to get them to leave their wild ways; but if they prefer to keep on as they are, it won't do to give away their retreat."

"That's all right, Dick. You know that I don't want to get the bulge on any man any further than I can get it by my wits."

"They've been pushed pretty close of late," continued Dick. "What I count on is that they shall be tired of dodging the Vigilantes. If it pays better to be straight, they may jump at the chance for a new deal."

So the detective was left to wait in a little mining-camp, while Dick went on into the mountains.

In a wild gorge, where it seemed as if the foot of man had never trod, he drew rein

and blew a shrill whistle by placing his fingers in his mouth.

Twice he repeated the signal, and then rode on.

Not a sound had replied to him.

"They may be here yet. I judge so from their recent exploits," he mused. "Otherwise I may have a pretty hunt for them."

But he was not to be disappointed.

At the mouth of a narrow defile a voice called to him.

"No! Yes! Hang me if it ain't Cap! What, Dick? Now you *air* back, fur good an' all!"

"No, Tony," replied the Tiger, as a man issued from the undergrowth, and seized his hand with enthusiasm.

"Eh! You ain't goin' back on us ag'in, Dick?"

"But I have never promised anything. Not to say that I don't owe you all more than I could hope to repay—in any way except one."

"Pay nothin'!" growled the man. "Who said anythin' about pay? But you're out of the jug, an' you've come home, by Judas! What does any one want more'n that?"

"Home? That's like you. But not to stay, Tony."

"Then we're gone up—that's all!"

Tony's face clouded over.

"Eh? What's the row?" asked Dick.

"Wal, ye see, they've been crowdin' us pretty close of late."

"I guessed as much."

"But, Dick, with you to the fore, we could give 'em a shakin' up that would make old bones rattle!"

"I'm done with that sort of thing, Tony."

"For why?"

"It don't pay in the long run."

"But it's a sweet racket while it does pan out!"

"I don't deny that. But there are better things than even that, if a man only looks about for them."

"You a-preachin', Dick?"

"It don't sound like old times, does it?"

"Not muchly!"

"Well, we grow wiser as we get older—some of us."

"What's in the wind, Dick?"

"I've struck a new lead; and I've come to let you fellows into it, if you'll catch on."

"Now that is the white article! Dick, old man, you hain't forgot us then, have you?"

"Did you ever know me to forget a man who had used me well, Tony?"

"Never!"

"Well, as I said, there's only one way in which I can make you some return for what you fellows have done for me; and I thought of you the minute the chance opened up."

"Put 'er thar, Dick! You know that thar ain't a galoot in the crowd that wouldn't do as much fur you ef he got the chance."

They clasped hands warmly.

"Wait until I have you all together, and then I'll show up."

So they went on talking of other things, until they gained the interior of a mountain pocket, where they were surrounded by a crowd of eager welcomers.

Every one of this band of outlaws knew the Tiger; and had he had as many hands as a Hindu idol, he would have had use for them all in the boisterous greeting that ensued.

Every one had the impression with which Tony had set out. They all thought that he had come to remain among them. The wish was father to the hope.

"Boys!" he cried, with feeling, "it warms the cockles of one's heart to receive such a welcome as this, I do assure you! But in declining what you offer me, I feel that I am going to offer you something even better."

"What is it, Dick?" asked the captain of the band. "Air they openin' up somewhar else? It's gittin' mighty warm jest about hyar; an' we've been talkin' of a change o' climate, fur our health."

"Boys," said the Tiger, "I'm on a new lay. It's the honest dodge. How'd you like to try it?"

They stared at him blankly.

"What's that, Dick? You hain't gone to bank-pullin'?" asked the captain.

Dick laughed.

"Is that what you call honest?" he asked.

"It may be made to *look* honest on the outside."

"No, no! I'm on a square deal this time, for a fact."

"I thought you was in the jug, the last I heard of you. We would 'a' gone an' torn out the town, if you had said the word. But as you walked in of your own accord, it looked as if you liked it better. You hain't come the religious dodge?"

"No, not that. But, boys, I've got a chance for a clean pardon."

"From the Gov'nor?"

"From the Governor!"

"No! How's that, Dick?"

"You know that their committee was captured recently?"

"By the galoots at Silver Riffle? Bully for them!"

"By the Golden Serpent," corrected the Tiger.

"No? The leetle beauty! She'll squeeze the sirup out of 'em!"

"It was her scheme to squeeze your humble servant out of the jug," said Dick, modestly.

"What? Oh, glory! Haw! haw! haw! Struck her whar she lives, ole man?"

And Dick was slapped on the back and poked in the ribs, after the manner of rough, yet jolly, good fellows.

"So you've been swopped off?" cried the captain of the road-agents. "Wish I was in your boots! Wouldn't mind havin' the like of her take a double half-hitch round me with her apron-string!"

"You're welcome!" said Dick.

"Show, now! You don't mean to say—"

"I mean to say that I haven't been swopped off as you suppose. It takes two to make such a bargain."

"But, great gods an' leetle fishes! thar's nothin' in such a bargain to make a man's blood run cold!"

"It didn't suit me, at any rate. Haven't I told you that I was on the honest lay?"

"Oh, yes; to be sure! But a man's got to git his leg out o' the trap first."

"My reformation dates further back than my getting into the trap."

And thereupon Dick detailed the agreement between himself and the Chief Magistrate.

"The question is, boys," he said, in conclusion, "will you throw up your hands with me and take a new deal all round?"

The men looked at one another.

It had never occurred to them that such a proposition would be extended to them; so in their private canvassing of the situation no one had ever sounded his comrades in this direction. Indeed, no one knew his own mind in so unexpected an issue.

Having the question sprung upon them in public, each dreaded to "show the white feather," lest he incur the scorn of his fellows.

"Come, come, boys!" said Dick, encouragingly; "somebody's got to break the ice. I know how you feel. But just now, Kidder, you admitted that this section was getting either too warm or too cold."

"Both, Dick," said the captain, a little uneasily. "The Vigilantes air makin' it warm for us, while our game is playin' freeze-out on us."

"Haven't you had enough of this sort of thing? How many of you have found that anything you get sticks to you?"

"There's the fun. That's something," urged the captain, thus tacitly admitting what Dick implied—that little, if anything, "stuck."

"But even fun, all of one kind, may get monotonous. Hasn't skipping about from crag to cavern about lost its charm to most of you?"

With furtive glances the men read one another's faces.

"Remember," urged Dick, "if you don't like the change, it will always be easy enough to come back to this. You don't get the chance to try the experiment every day!"

"Dick," asked Kidder, "what do you want to break us up for?"

"Because I think it will be a good thing for you all, as well as for the community at large."

"Waal, it's jest as the boys say. They've stood by me fair and square—I'll say that fur 'em. Now ef they want to shake 'em up ag'in, I don't kick. Come, fellers! what's the good word?"

Still the men looked at one another, hitching uneasily.

Dick saw that he could start the thing by dragging one into the foreground. So, clapping a sturdy fellow on the shoulder, he said:

"Brick, you've got a wife and some babies over the Divide, haven't you?"

"I have, fur a fact," admitted the man, awkwardly.

"How long is it since you've lived with them quietly?"

"With the old woman an' the kids? Waal, I reckon it's a good two year an' a half, at the least calculation."

"And how long since you've seen them at all?"

"Waal, not sence the last bout you had with Yaller Jack. Six or seven months, ain't it?"

"Do you like this sort of thing so much better than the old life?"

"Waal," said the fellow, scratching his head reflectively, "'twa'n't so bad, an' that's a fact! The old woman used to floor me once in a while with a stool, when I went home wild an' bound to tear the house out; but then, ag'in, we use ter git along purty comfortable when I behaved myself. Take it all round, I allow it wa'n't so bad."

Dick smiled at this honest summing up of matrimonial felicity and discord.

"Brick, you ought to go back there and do a man's part by the woman you agreed to stand by through thick and through thin."

"Waal, I allow that's purty near so."

"Of course it is. Will you go back? Now's the best chance you'll ever have."

"I stan's by the boys," said Brick, with a decisiveness which showed that his allegiance to his pals was by far the strongest consideration with him.

"But if they all call the thing off?"

"Then I'm agreeable."

Dick turned to the rest.

"Is there any man in the crowd," he asked, "who wants to hold the rest to this bond, if it is the general wish to break it?"

Of course that was not putting the issue quite fairly; but no one seemed to see it.

All stood mute. When it thus became evident that there was to be no opposition, many faces brightened. This in its turn confirmed the trend of popular sentiment.

"Well," said Dick, "that settles it, then!"

"Boys," said their captain, "I step down an' out without no hard feelin's toward anybody. You've stood by me like good fellers; an' I've always tried to do the square thing by you. I hand you over to Tiger Dick, who'll lead you better than I could, though not with a better heart."

"Three cheers fur Captain Tiger Dick!" shouted one of the men.

"Hold on!" cried the Tiger, raising his hand to intercept the tribute. "First, three cheers for Captain Kidder!"

They gave them with a right good will, and then cheered their new leader, who was to take them out from under the ban of the law.

A few hours later Tiger Dick dashed up with his men at his back, and seizing Jim Farnsworth's hand eagerly, cried:

"Here we are, the whole raft of us!"

"And meanwhile," said the detective, whose face also was radiant, "I've had my streak of luck!"

"What luck?" asked Dick.

"Look for yourself, and see what you make of it," said Farnsworth.

And turning, with a wave of his hand he indicated a bystander.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A VENGEFUL LITTLE "GREASER."

THE person to whom Jim Farnsworth referred as having brought him his "streak of luck" was a Spaniard, who bowed gravely before Tiger Dick's keen scrutiny.

But one glance at his glittering eyes, over which the lids drooped like masks, revealed the torrent of pent emotions that lurked in his soul.

"Don Giacomo!" cried Dick, who knew him.

"A service de V.!" replied the Spaniard.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"It is rather, what can I do for you, senor!"

"I accept the amendment. What can you do for me?"

"I can lead you to the place you seek."

"Ah!" said Dick, warily.

"To the secret retreat of the Golden Serpent; to the mountain fastness where she has her prisoners in hiding," reiterated Don Giacomo.

"But I thought you were a particular friend of the Golden Serpent," urged Dick. "You may lead us to her in a way that will be anything but to our advantage."

"Senor, you have said well, that I was a friend of the Golden Serpent. A devotion unparalleled in the world's history has proved that. "But"—with a shrug—"what would you? *Por Dios!* she is a woman!"

"And therefore?"

"Has been guilty of the basest treachery where she owed most!" cried the Spaniard, with an ebullition of fierce rancor. "*Car-amba!* is it for nothing that the Infidel Mohammedans hold that women have no souls, while the holy Fathers of our own blessed religion have ever believed them emissaries of the devil?"

Dick smiled, at the same time keeping a keen eye on the Spaniard.

"How is it," he asked, "that, holding women in such contempt, you Spaniards are yet so gallant, that your common form of greeting to a lady is—'Senora, I kiss your feet'?"

"*Mil diablos!*" snarled the Spaniard, "we must perjure ourselves to match their lying! Do we therefore mean what we say to them?"

"It would seem not, in most cases," said Dick dryly. "Meanwhile, what guarantee have I that you will not use against me the facility in lying which you have gained in your intercourse with the various ladies of your acquaintance?"

Don Giacomo bit his lip, while his olive cheek became livid with suppressed rage.

He was not so thick-skinned as to be invulnerable to the keen point of the shaft of insult that Tiger Dick let fly at him with perfect placidity of face and voice.

"Could I betray you, except for her advantage?" he asked. "Yet knows not the whole world how little kindness I owe her?"

Tiger Dick assumed an expression of curiosity, as if the matter alluded to would be news to him. It was sport to him, to "poke" this fiery nature "up with a sharp stick."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Ah, God of my fathers!" snapped the Spaniard, "must I recall how she exposed me to the humiliation of appearing in her vile woman's raiment, in the hope of gaining time for flight while the avengers of her crime were in pursuit of me?"

"Now you mention it, I think I do recall something of the kind," said the Tiger, indifferently. "But I remember, too, that it occurred to me at the time that, if you had been eager to frustrate her scheme rather than aid her escape, you could have waited and revealed your identity to her pursuers, instead of leading them on the wild-goose chase you did."

"*Madre de Dios!*" cried the Spaniard, "should I give myself up to the scorn and ridicule of the world, while there was a chance to escape that humiliation? Did not she count upon this?"

"You make a very straight story of it," said the Tiger.

"Is not the truth ever simple?" asked Don Giacomo.

"So you have waited all these months for your revenge?"

"It has been the study of my days, the dream of my nights! She surrounded by her desperadoes; I alone: what chance was there to strike, and strike home? But now you were against her, I knew that you would provide yourself with a force sufficient to cope with hers."

"But how do you come to know that I am against her?"

"Does not the whole world know it?"

"I fancied not. I thought that considerable precaution had been taken to keep the world out of the secret."

"It is an open secret now, at any rate."

"How so?"

"Mira!"

And the Spaniard drew a copy of the *Chronicle* from the breast of his jacket, and extended it to Dick.

With a glance of lightning the Tiger swept

through a single head-line, which told him what he owed to reportorial enterprise; and without stopping to read the article in detail, he crushed the paper in his hand, and—we ask the indulgence of the reader!—expressed his sentiments in exclamatory “French.”

“What’s the row, Dick?” asked Detective Farnsworth.

“Row!” repeated the Tiger. “They’ve let some infernal reporter into the thing; and he’s blowed it to the four quarters of Heaven!”

“The deuce they have! Well, they may have a few lives on their consciences! That thing lets us out.”

“In or out, that ain’t the point. There must be no lives lost!” cried the Tiger, energetically. “Come! there’s not a moment to lose! Mount, men! and away!”

He bounded into the saddle.

His men took fire at his example, and were scarcely a whit behind him.

“Look you, Senor Giacomo Monteverro!” cried the Tiger, in those ringing tones that made him the master of weaker men, “I will accept you as my guide. If you are faithful to me, and can do anything like what you promise, you shall have such a reward as will leave you no reason for dissatisfaction. But if I see one doubtful sign, one act that awakens the faintest suspicion of treachery—mark you! I’ll not wait for explanation; but I’ll put a bullet through your heart so quick that you’ll never know what hurts you!”

“Do me the justice, then, to remember that my life hangs upon the correctness of your judgment, biased—I think you yourself will admit the fact—by some slight prejudice.”

“You shall have the benefit of every doubt,” was the Tiger’s assurance.

“Gracias! Shall I lay my motives open to suspicion, then, if I say that, in my opinion, there is time enough to lay your plans with due deliberation?”

“What leads you to think that the Golden Serpent will not be beforehand with us?”

“I being well-mounted, as you see, have ridden without break direct from San Francisco. This paper was not five minutes off the press when I received it. At that time the Golden Serpent was at least a day’s ride away from the metropolis, according to intelligence which I received by telegraph. I have, therefore, that much the start of her, even if she was in telegraphic communication with the city, and was informed of this on its appearance.”

“Look here!” cried the Tiger. “It seems to me that you keep yourself very well informed as to the movements of the Golden Serpent!”

And he darted a piercing glance at the glib Spaniard.

Don Giacomo smiled so as to show his glittering teeth.

“If you had my hatred, and the purpose to which I am sworn, you too might be as watchful!”

“And you feel that it has paid you to have spies upon her for six months?” asked Dick, incredulously.

“For two days only,” corrected the Spaniard.

“And why for two days?”

“Because I could not watch her and you at the same time, senor.”

“Me! Why have you watched me?”

“To learn your relations with her.”

“Pray explain yourself.”

“Knowing that the Golden Serpent had captured the Legislative committee, I at first supposed that it was with a view to exacting a ransom. It was my purpose to devise some plan to get her into the clutches of the law. I tracked her to the Capital, to her interview with His Excellency, the Governor. The counsel of notable men that followed, together with your appearance in connection with it, gave me a cue to her real purposes. While pausing to rearrange my plans in harmony with this new situation, the paper informed me of the plot on your side. I at once conceived what I have since carried out.”

All of this was told very frankly. It might be true; it *might* be a clever trap.

Tiger Dick saw all the possible bearings. In any event, it would not injure his position to be outspoken.

“Look you, Senor Giacomo!” he said, in

the tone he had previously adopted. “I shall be perfectly frank with you. You may be dealing squarely with me, and you may be dealing mighty crooked! Whichever way it be, I put my life in the balance against yours. If you trick me, you’re a dead man! That is my only protection. I’ll risk it on that!”

To himself he said:

“The scoundrel is too cowardly to put himself up as a target for my pistol-practice!”

That matter being thus settled between them, Tiger Dick was now at leisure to think out his immediate plan of operations.

“How shall I secure the prisoners first?” he meditated.

And while he rode forward at a breathless gallop, a bold plan gradually formed itself in his mind.

“It will be leaping into the lion’s mouth!” he said to himself.

But the dash of the scheme and the danger fascinated him. His face lighted up with a glow of enthusiasm.

“I’ll do it!” he cried, aloud.

“Do what?” asked Jim Farnsworth.

Without answering him, Tiger Dick turned and scrutinized the Spaniard keenly.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BOLD SCHEME.

“DON GIACOMO,” said the Tiger, “if I remember rightly, you personated the Golden Serpent for two nights at the faro-table.”

“To my shame and misery!” groaned the Spaniard.

“Nevertheless, the resemblance was so close that even her servants, and others who had daily intimacy with her, did not detect the imposture.”

“I being *en masque*. I bear no likeness to her in feature.”

“Exactly. It is not necessary to my purpose.”

“Your purpose? *Por Dios!* you do not expect me to again put myself in that devil’s trap?”

“Not quite. Fortunately, the Golden Serpent has met you half-way.”

“Explain, senor.”

“She now dresses, I am told, in a sort of composite costume—the attire suited to her sex modified to meet the requirements of her mode of life.”

“Yes; her apparel is a cross between the ordinary riding habit of a Mexican lady and the accouterments of a *caballero*.”

“So that any one seeing her at such a distance that her face was not distinguishable, would yet be able to recognize her?”

“Of a verity. No one else ever presented such an appearance as she.”

“She goes masked?”

“*Si, senor.*”

“Then one bearing the close physical resemblance to her which you have been proved to bear, might still personate her as easily as before.”

“May all the fiends rain burning brimstone upon me, if—”

“Make no rash vows,” interposed the Tiger, with a quietness which showed how immovable was his iron determination.

“Stick to the point. You *might* personate her, if disposed?”

“Which I never shall be!”

“That depends.”

“You have overlooked one obstacle,” the Spaniard interposed, nervously.

“What obstacle?” asked the Tiger, coldly.

“There was then no necessity for me to speak. Now, any one may know her voice, though her face is yet masked. How would my barytone pass for her soprano?”

“I have thought of that,” said the Tiger, indifferently. “There will be no need for you to speak.”

“*Mil demonios!*” cried Don Giacomo. “You speak as if it were decided that I should again assume this infamous position!”

Tiger Dick smiled upon the excited speaker a most significant smile.

“We won’t consider the infamy,” he said, quietly.

The Spaniard’s eyes dropped before that sarcastic scrutiny.

“You have watched her throughout these months while she has pursued her new life?” pursued the Tiger.

“Waiting for my revenge!” growled Don Giacomo, sullenly.

“Then you are familiar with all her haunts?”

“All!”

“Her prisoners are not in her usual retreat?”

“No, senor.”

“It is then probably but weakly guarded?”

“Two men only are detailed for that purpose.”

“Good! We shall have no difficulty. Don Giacomo, place me under obligation, by leading us at once to that retreat. Arrange so that we can surprise the guard, and capture them without fail.”

The Spaniard’s face was now a study. All these months had he nursed his revenge, planning all sorts of dire requital. Now, when it seemed at last in his grasp, he found himself suddenly confronted with the menace of a fresh humiliation.

But he had gone too far to retreat. He knew Tiger Dick well enough to need no assurance that his will was without appeal.

Consumed by impotent rage, he could only gnaw his mustache in silence.

So he led the way to the Golden Serpent’s retreat, unable to guess what use was to be made of it when captured.

“Here we must stop,” he said, at last.

“A half-dozen men on foot will be best able to accomplish the rest.”

Tiger Dick selected his men; and under the lead of the Spaniard they crept forward to the mouth of a narrow defile.

Suddenly the Tiger rose to his feet.

“Go slow, pard!” he said, in his ordinary tone.

His eyes were fixed upon a man whom his noiseless appearance had surprised on his post.

Apprehending the assault of no enemy, the guard thought only of not being found off duty by the unexpected return of his leader; and he had therefore become careless.

“Drop it!” commanded the Tiger, as the fellow’s hand involuntarily sought his weapon.

Seeing that he was checkmated in this, yet with the sense of duty still dominant, the guard inflated his lungs for a yell of warning to his comrade, somewhere in the pocket to which the defile gave admittance.

“It will be your last!” warned the Tiger, divining his purpose.

“You’ve got me, stranger,” said the guard at last.

“You bet I have!”

“Who air you; and what d’ye want ’round hyar?”

“I am Tiger Dick!”

“The deuce ye say!”

“Shall I answer your other question?”

“Don’t trouble yerself, Mister Man! I’ve hyeard o’ you before! Jest walk in, an’ help yerself to whatever suits ye. You’ll do it anyway!”

“You’re a sensible fellow. You’ll live to hang, I have no doubt, by reason of your having the wisdom not to run into needless danger.”

The fellow grinned, as he said:

“I ain’t buckin’ ag’in Tiger Dick; an’ don’t you forgit it!”

“Whom were you going to call to just now?” asked the Tiger.

“My pard, Lone Lan.”

“Is there any one else with you?”

“Nary!”

“Call him. But mind *how* you call him!”

And the Tiger dropped out of sight in the underbrush.

“Waal, I swear! He’s goin’ to corral the both of us! Waal, he kin, fur all the resk I’m goin’ fur to take o’ gittin’ my hide perforated fur nothin’!”

And muttering thus prudently, the surprised guard shouted:

“Ho, Lan!”

“What yer want?” came back an unmusical voice.

“Come hyar, quicker!”

After an interval, which the guard improved by whistling the refrain of a border song, a man slouched up carelessly.

“What’s the matter with ye?” he demanded.

“Let me interduce ye to His Honor, Tiger Dick!” said the guard, with a grin that showed that he enjoyed the joke.

Dick rose into view, smiling serenely.

Lone Lan uttered an oath.

"You've bagged us, boss?" he inquired.

"Don't it look so?" asked the Tiger.

"An' you all alone by yerself?"

"Not so bad as that. I have a little batch of backers with me; and if that isn't enough, I can produce a few more at a moment's notice."

At a sign from the Tiger his men rose from their concealment.

"That'll do," said Lone Lan, quietly.

"You take the pot, Cap!"

And without any further show of feeling he handed over his weapons.

The prisoners were bound, and their captors entered the retreat.

Tiger Dick found in the Golden Serpent's private quarters an ample stock of clothing from which to select.

By the sheer force of will, and without the necessity of any open threat, he soon had Don Giacomo once more invested with the personality of the object of his bitterest hatred.

The Tiger then donned the disguise in which he had left the prison, and said:

"Now lead the way to the hiding-place of the captured committee."

"But, you will force me to enter there?" cried the Spaniard.

"I shall enter with you."

"But, a breath, and we are betrayed to certain death!"

"That might happen anywhere. Come! we are losing time!"

And with the certainty of death if he rebelled, Don Giacomo submitted himself to his miserable fate, cursing the Golden Serpent, who one way or another was at the bottom of all his misfortunes.

On reaching the vicinity of the glen in which our friends of the committee were confined, Dick left his men outside under the command of their former captain, and advanced boldly, alone with the disguised Don Giacomo.

"Now that you are in for it," he said to the Spaniard, "it will be to your advantage to conduct yourself boldly. Ride by the guard as if you expected to pass on his recognition of you. If he halts us, make an impatient gesture toward me, and I will do the necessary talking."

Without using any precaution, they spurred their horses forward at a rapid gallop.

At the mouth of a ravine into which they turned, a man rose in the bushes, and presented a carbine.

Don Giacomo made a gesture as if he were impatient of interruption.

The guard lowered his weapon, and stood aside, with a military salute.

"Good!" said the Tiger, when they had passed. "You are a born actor."

"I will praise the saints, if I am not a dead actor within the next few hours!" muttered the Spaniard, sullenly. "Have you thought of an avenue of escape, if we are detected?"

"The way will doubtless suggest itself when the emergency arises," said the Tiger, indifferently.

"You are bold. I hope that the saints fight on your side."

"Let the issue show."

And with the words on his lips, he dashed into the midst of the outlaws.

CHAPTER XXV.

A GAME OF BLUFF.

It will be remembered that Abigail's defense of "ye daintie dude," when his incautious remark had brought upon him the penalty of having to better the cooking he had criticised, was the occasion of her first lover's quarrel with Hugh Cole, to the not slight gratification of the Major-General; but that before this could develop itself, the Queen of the Road-Agents had appeared on the scene.

The reader will now readily infer that what was taken for the Golden Serpent was in fact her counterfeit presentment, Don Giacomo in disguise.

Of course the reporter would have at once recognized the Tiger but for his disguise, since it was Hugh's graphic pen that had recently made him famous. In such a contingency surprise might have betrayed him into a use of Dick's name, which would have frustrated the whole plot by betraying his identity.

As it was, there was the danger of his voice being recognized; so Dick's first care was to give Hugh the proper cue.

Of the rest, he felt sure that none knew him personally.

Riding directly up to Hugh, the Tiger burst into a bantering laugh, as, grasping his hand and shaking it heartily, he cried:

"Ha, ha, ha! My boy, this ain't so bad a joke. They've got you cooped up here finely, haven't they? But everything's grist that comes to your mill. I suppose it will furnish you with materials for a sensational article when you get back home."

"And it isn't every day that a 'Frisco detective enters a place of this kind as peaceably as I have, eh?"

Now, under ordinary circumstances Hugh's wits would have been sufficiently keen to "catch on" to something *sub rosa* in this familiar address by a total stranger.

But taking it for granted that the Golden Serpent was accompanied by one of her own men, he had not given Dick a moment's heed, until he found himself actually claimed as a boon companion.

Then, with his thoughts distracted by his misunderstanding with his lady-love, he did not recover himself as quickly as was his wont, but shook Dick's hand mechanically, with a vague half-smile of inquiry, which told only too plainly that he was trying to make out what it all meant.

Dick saw a gulf yawning at his feet, if he did not quickly and skillfully cover this balm in his plans. Everything depended on the suspicions of the outlaws not being roused. A breath of inquiry into the identity of the silent impersonator, and the bubble would burst.

Without showing a trace of discomfiture, the Tiger dropped Hugh's hand, and turned with the same hearty familiarity to Uncle Billy.

"And Uncle Billy, too! Of all the men in the State, you're the one to take this most good-naturedly, I'll be bound. I see that you haven't lost flesh and color through anxiety. If I hadn't strict orders to fetch you all back to 'Frisco, I'll be hanged if I wouldn't leave you here—you seem so well content!"

Now, Uncle Billy was never caught napping. He didn't know the man before him "from a side of sole-leather." But one thing he did know—that he wasn't what he professed to be, a member of the detective force of the metropolis.

Billy, to put it in his own way, would have sworn that he knew all the boys as well as if he had studied the catechism out of the same book with them.

In this state of affairs, then, Uncle Billy—to use his own expression once more—"smelt a mice instanter, and went it blind for what it was worth!"

"The dickens you would!" he cried, taking his cue cleverly from the Tiger. "Well, if the boys haven't forgotten the crack of the boss's whip since I've been away, I'll run you out of the force the minute I set foot on my native heath!"

Dick was satisfied with this. There was an understanding, however indefinite as yet, between him and Uncle Billy.

The outlaws, who were staring from their supposed leader to the free and easy detective she had brought among them, "took it all like lambs."

Turning to Judge Littlejohn, Dick went on:

"I recognize Senator Littlejohn, though of course he don't know Tom Chesuble from hundreds of others of his constituents."

And Dick bowed to the great man as became his pretended position.

He received in return a formal recognition. Senator Littlejohn was by no means in the best of humors. It was all right that he should be rescued, but the point was that he should never have been put in such a position.

Dick included the rest in a general bow, only a little more pronounced to the ladies, as he went on glibly:

"I'll depend upon you to back me in assuring the ladies that they need endure no further anxiety. When I say that they shall be back in Frisco as quick as horseflesh will stand to be driven, my word is good—ain't it, Uncle Billy?"

"I wish I had Tom Chesuble's signature

guaranteeing a gold-mine with an output equal to Tombstone!" was Uncle Billy's indorsement, albeit he had no more idea who it might be he was accrediting so highly than if it were the man in the moon!

By this time Hugh Cole had gathered his scattered wits. He saw Uncle Billy's play, for he too knew that there was no such man on the force as Tom Chesuble, and it was equally clear to him that by his awkwardness he had nearly spoiled the situation.

He therefore set about to repair his fault.

"But what is this all about, Tom?" he asked, in the most natural tone in the world. "What are we here for, and what influence is getting us out? We're dying of curiosity. We've thought it must be for ransom. But then no overtures have been made to us looking to redemption. Clear matters up a bit, before you go any further."

Dick had been disappointed in Hugh; but he now saw that he was playing skillfully into his hands. He was giving him an opportunity to explain the situation in his own way.

To both Hugh and Uncle Billy it was a puzzle to guess what could be the need of any underhand proceedings in the presence of the Golden Serpent; but they knew that it was better to let the stranger have his way, if he was indeed a friend.

"Availing himself of this opportunity, Dick turned to the gaping outlaws, and said, with the off-hand patronage which officers of the law generally assume toward criminals:

"And I suppose these fellows are wondering why their charming leader is leaving me to do all the chinning, when, as is commonly known, the ladies are apt to claim their share in such matters."

The robbers were too well accustomed to the whims of their Queen to wonder much at anything she chose to do; and this fact was one on which the Tiger had counted.

Turning to the disguised Giacomo, he said, with a bow:

"If I don't put the case straight, madam, don't hesitate to interrupt me at any time."

With an impatient wave of the hand, Don Giacomo signaled him to proceed.

"Well, boys," he said, "you must know that your Queen prefers not to give us sharps of the law even so much of a clew to her identity as a familiarity with her voice would be. As it is, the moment she chooses to don the ordinary dress of her sex, we have no means of telling her from any other lady."

"Now, when it came to the Governor of the State, she not only let him hear her speak, but showed him her face! She is shrewd enough to know that there is no likelihood of his ever turning detective; so that his knowledge will be no injury to her."

"And now for her business with His Excellency."

"It was supposed that the capture of these good people was the work of the Silver Rifle crowd, who had determined to put a veto on the investigation. But two days ago a lady called upon the Governor, introduced herself as the Golden Serpent, and announced that she held the committee as hostages, in exchange for whom she demanded the release of that gay and festive road-agent, Tiger Dick!"

The instant that name passed Dick's lips, the identity of the voice, which had all along sounded familiar to him, flashed through Cole's mind. He knew that Tiger Dick himself stood before them, in his assumed character of Tom Chesuble the detective.

But if the facts were as he stated them, and His Excellency had acceded to the terms of the Queen of the Road-Agents, of course the Golden Serpent herself knew him in his true character, and the reason he assigned for her silence was a false one.

Moreover, if he did not wish to reveal his identity to the Queen's followers, why had he accompanied her there at all?

Lastly, why had he pretended to put himself in confidential relations with Hugh and Uncle Billy to the apparent exclusion of the outlaws and their leader?

The whole thing savored of fraud of some kind; and Hugh at once put himself on the defensive against the Tiger, watching for some clew to his motives. That they were sinister to himself and his friends, he more and more feared.

"Well," continued Dick, smiling pleasantly. "His Excellency knew so little about criminal wire-pulling, as familiar as he is with political wire-pulling, that he suggested the possibility of holding the Golden Serpent, seeing that she had put herself in his power, and negotiating with her followers—you gentlemen!—for an exchange, the committee for your leader; and so keeping Tiger Dick. Whereupon she coolly told him that she had come prepared to put her life in the balance over against that of the Tiger. If she were detained, instead of entertaining the overtures of the State for an exchange, you gentlemen were instructed to string your prisoners up in a row, and notify the authorities where the bodies could be found."

"An' we'd 'a' done it!" growled Dud Van Brunt, the Queen's lieutenant, seizing the chance to show his zeal to his superior. "An' then, by the Eternal! we'd 'a' walked in an' cleaned out yer whole State, but we'd 'a' snaked our Queen out o' yer dirty jail!"

"You see," said the Tiger, turning to the committee with a smile, "how near you have come to being hung up like old clothes before a Jew's shop!"

Uncle Billy laughed. Some of the others turned pale.

"It was that consideration," continued the Tiger, "that induced His Excellency to listen favorably to the terms offered by this very shrewd diplomatist. A council of the nobles and nabobs was called, and a formal agreement was entered into, by which the State pledged itself to give up the Tiger on the restoration of the committee."

"It is therefore my business to conduct you back to Frisco."

"Madam," turning to the pretended Queen, "is it all straight so far?"

Don Giacomo bowed his head.

"We shall be accompanied by a guard of a half-dozen men," continued Dick. "I suppose the Golden Serpent will prefer to pick them out herself."

This was a hint to Don Giacomo, which he was not slow to take.

He had the shrewdness to select one good man, to ward off anything likely to provoke suspicion; but the other five were purposely chosen with a view to their being easily dealt with when it came time to dispose of them.

"That leaves you, Mr. Lieutenant," said Dick, "to look after the stronghold in her absence."

"And now, gentlemen," addressing the guard with business-like briskness—"the sooner we are on the move, the sooner, no doubt, will be relieved the anxiety of these good people."

Horses were at once got, and everything was in readiness, when Hugh's suspicions prompted him to interpose:

"Not to mention our money, we have been deprived of our arms. Are we to continue in this defenseless state?"

"My dear sir," replied the Tiger, "that's a matter of no particular importance. You will have no need for weapons between here and Frisco. I suppose you fancy that every one you meet will want to take you prisoners. But I guess you are safe from further molestation."

"But," persisted Hugh, "if the purpose of our capture was not a personal gain, the Golden Serpent will doubtless be willing to return them to us."

And he looked at the seeming Queen.

In reply to this appeal, Don Giacomo made an impatient gesture with his hand to the outlaws, and then spurred his horse toward the outlet of the glen, as if he were annoyed at delay over matters of so little importance.

"Hand over the weapons," said the lieutenant; and they were produced and restored to their owners.

Then the company set out in a body, leaving the outlaws who were not included staring after them.

They were perhaps half-way to the exit of the glen, when the silence was broken by a rapid succession of shots on ahead.

An instant later a fluttering figure came into view—a figure which was the counterpart of the disguised Don Giacomo!

It was the Golden Serpent in person!

Instantly, without a word of warning, Tiger Dick began to fire his revolvers.

With a savage snarl of murderous hatred, Don Giacomo joined him in this assault.

"It is a plot! We are to be massacred!" shouted Hugh Cole, with his heart in his mouth.

His first thought was of Abigail. Spurring his horse to her side, he drew his weapons, determined to make the false detective his first target.

CHAPTER XXVI.

IN HOT WATER.

"RALLY! rally! Uncle Billy! Judge! Rally round the ladies!" shouted the excited reporter.

Both of the gentlemen thus appealed to responded with a promptness which proved that there was good stuff in them when it came "to the pinch."

In the face of real danger, Judge Littlejohn forgot his sullenness. At heart he was an old war-horse.

Fortunately Uncle Billy's horse bore him directly between Hugh and the Tiger, so that the latter was for a moment prevented from using his weapon. Otherwise this narrative would have taken a very different turn.

That one instant gave the Tiger his opportunity to "save his bacon."

"Hold!" he cried, stripping off the false beard that disguised the lower portion of his face. "Do you not see? I am here to rescue you. Yonder comes the real Golden Serpent."

There was no time for further explanation. He blazed away with his revolvers to the right and to the left.

But these words were sufficient to arrest Hugh's attention and lead him to observe just what the Tiger was doing.

What he saw was, that, while his own friends suffered not at all, the guard of outlaws were toppled off their horses like so many tenpins.

"Quickly! there is no time to lose!" cried the Tiger. "Help me to secure some of this ammunition. We'll need it before we get out of this."

And leaping from the saddle, he with the greatest possible dispatch unbuckled a cartridge belt from the nearest of the men he had unhorsed.

Taking them wholly by surprise, he and Don Giacomo had dropped four of them before they could lift a finger in self-defense.

Of the other two, one, taking advantage of the Tiger's momentary pause when he revealed himself in his true character and openly declared his purpose, so as to stay Hugh's determination to shoot him—one drew his weapon; but it was not a self-cocker, he lost the most precious instant in his life in lifting the hammer.

The Tiger was better armed, with "shooting-irons" that could "talk" as fast as he could crook his finger.

The outlaw's bullet flew harmlessly over his head as its speeder toppled over backward out of his saddle.

The remaining road-agent "turned tail." Fairly grasping the situation at last, Hugh leaped to the ground and aided the Tiger with all his might.

Uncle Billy would have done likewise but for his superabundance of flesh. He knew that a man of his Falstaffian proportions could not get back into the saddle as quickly as the occasion demanded.

"I'm better at stopping bullets than for that kind of work," he cried, quite cheerfully. "When it comes time for the display of my forte, you can depend upon me."

Judge Littlejohn thought of another way of making himself useful.

"Which way?" he shouted to the Tiger.

"Let us give the ladies a start."

"Oh, my dear judge!" cried Mrs. Spike, at once about to precipitate herself upon him. "Save me!—oh, save me!"

In disgust he evaded her, and still hung upon the Tiger's direction.

Dick swept a lightning glance upon the scene.

"To the defile yonder! See!—where the Golden Serpent just came through!" cried Hugh, anticipating him.

But his idea met with opposition from an unexpected quarter.

"Not that way!" shouted Don Giacomo. "Por Dios! can we pass through the defile, running the gantlet of a man in ambush? To the rocks! to the rocks! They are our only defense!"

Tiger Dick saw the justice of this.

"The don is right," he said. "One man could hold the pass against an army. To the crags yonder! Away with you!"

And he pointed in the direction in which Don Giacomo had already set out.

"Away!" shouted the Judge, driving the others before him like sheep.

The Honorable Benoni was helpless. It was as much as he could do to keep in the saddle at all.

Ye daintie dude was equally demoralized.

"Good heavens, this is awful!" he murmured.

"We shall all be killed!" sobbed the Major-General.

In proof that courage is largely a matter of habit, she found, in her wonted field of warfare, pluck enough to cry to her shivering wretch of a husband:

"Benoni Spike, why *don't* you do something? I believe you just *want* us to be murdered!"

"But, my dear," he gasped, "what can I do?"

"Do!" she repeated, scornfully. "You can save your worthless carcass! That's all you *can* do!"

"I wish I was sure of even that!" groaned poor Benoni.

Meanwhile, his daughter, as pale as death, yet heroically silent, did her woman's part of implicit and intelligent obedience.

Only she cast an anxious look back at Hugh, then at the approaching fury of her own sex, and lastly at the general body of the outlaws, who were now rushing forward with enraged cries, to avenge the death of their comrades and to defeat this bold attempt to rob them of their prisoners.

"What a shame to make a woman so helpless!" she thought.

Then her great love swelled in her bosom until it burst into speech.

"Oh! do not delay!" she cried, over her shoulder. "You will be too late!"

Ye daintie dude, with the cold perspiration starting from every pore, was already on ahead, "streaking it" for the crags that were to form a rampart for them. He offered no protection to the lady to whom he was supposed to be paying court. Indeed, he had forgotten all about her, in his anxiety to save his—necktie, and what was in it!

It required but a moment for Hugh to possess himself of an ammunition belt, while the Tiger despoiled two of the fallen foe.

Then the latter shouted:

"Into the saddle! We have not another moment to lose!"

The exigency was indeed pressing: for on the one hand the Golden Serpent was close upon them, a veritable wild-cat in her rage, while her men were almost within pistol-range on the other side, furious at having been so cleverly "sold."

But a glance showed Hugh that he could secure another belt, and yet be in the saddle as soon as his companion; and it was a point of pride not to be outdone in the eyes of his lady-love, even by so good a man as the Tiger.

It was the approach of the Golden Serpent that would occupy the Tiger during that additional moment.

On approaching the sentinel at the mouth of the ravine which gave admittance to the retreat, she had learned of the precedence of her double, and knew that the man she had sought to save had stolen a march on her.

This last proof of his scorn fanned her passionate nature to a white heat.

"I will *kill* him!" she panted, through quivering lips. "*Madre de Dios!* was ever such base ingratitude? I will cut the heart out of his breast, and see if it is indeed a stone!"

At sight of the Tiger leading the prisoners out of the pocket, she uttered a hoarse cry of fury. She fairly foamed at the mouth.

The Tiger saw his doom in her eyes.

"Traitor! Beast!" she cried, drawing a revolver as she swooped down upon him.

"I hate to drop her!" said Dick, aloud: "for I do owe her something for her friendly intentions. But it won't do to let her send me to Paradise on the other side, because I don't show a proper appreciation of the Paradise within her arms. I'll go as lightly on her as I can."

And just as she raised her revolver for a

first shot at him, he took a snap-shot at her horse's head, aiming at the eye.

The bullet pierced the brain of the ill-fated beast. With a scream of pain that was almost human, the horse made a tremendous bound into the air, and came down all in a heap.

On the rise of that vault the Golden Serpent's weapon exploded.

The Tiger heard a quick "zip!" and felt as if a bee had stung him on the ear.

The next instant the woman came fluttering almost at his feet.

He sprang forward to catch her, and so break her fall; his humanity, even in that moment of deadly personal peril, not forgotten.

But the distance was too great. She struck the ground with a dull thud, and so lay stunned.

The situation suggested a bright thought to Hugh. He was already in the saddle.

"Pick her up, and hand her to me!" he cried. "We'll use her to bluff her crowd with!"

In a twinkling the Tiger "caught on," and springing forward, he snatched up the inanimate body and placed it in Hugh's arms.

But now a shower of bullets came buzzing about their ears. It was lucky that they were fired running, else even then the current of events might have been turned into a channel which would have carried our friends to a quite different goal.

With a bound the Tiger alighted in the saddle with his face toward the croup.

He had practiced this mode of riding in anticipation of just such an emergency; and now it stood him in good stead.

Out came a revolver in either hand; and as his horse leaped away, following the lead of that ridden by Hugh, he fired a return salute at the outlaws which gave them a Roland for their Oliver!

The certainty of his aim dropped the lieutenant and the man immediately following him; yet so well disciplined were the outlaws, and so intent were they on rescuing their Queen, that, albeit nothing cools the ardor of men like the loss of their leaders, even this did not check, even for a moment, their determined pursuit.

Tiger Dick had never been more hotly pressed than now, when he gained the shelter of a rampart of rocks by the very skin of his teeth.

After dropping the foremost of his pursuers, he restored his weapons to their holsters; and twisting his body and seizing his horse's mane at the withers, he executed a leap and wriggle which reversed his position—a maneuver common to the circus-rider.

Now he could give attention to what was going on among his friends.

Don Giacomo had been in advance at the start, the others waiting for Tiger Dick's indorsement of his suggestion before following him toward the rocks.

But in his mad panic LISPINARD DE MORGAN had lashed his horse into a frenzy almost equal to his own, and was now several leaps ahead of the don.

Dick heard the don shout out to the frantic dude:

"To the left! to the left! *Caramba!* there is no shelter that way!"

Dick saw the Spaniard was right, and a second time indorsed him.

"To the left!" he shouted.

"To the left!" repeated Judge Littlejohn, passing the order.

But in his headlong flight "ye daintie dude" had gained too much of an advantage for his own good. He was already committed to the right pass, while, deaf to the meaning of the cries in his rear, they only added to his terror.

Those following him went to the left in the wake of the don. LISPINARD discovered his error only when his horse reared before an impassable barrier.

The animal pivoted on its hind legs, so that "ye daintie dude" clasped it about the neck with both arms to prevent slipping over the croup.

When the horse came down, its fore feet were considerably lower than its hind feet; and it saved itself only by a desperate scramble backward.

The effect was what might have been expected. "Ye daintie dude" shot over its

head, and rolled down the rocks to a lower level.

This accident happened in full view of the others.

Abigail drew her horse upon its haunches, so that the others sped past her.

Unmindful of this and of the coming danger, she appealed to Hugh. Her love for him gave him precedence to all other men in her eyes. It seemed to her that he could do whatever was to be done.

"Oh, he will be killed! he will be killed!" she cried. "Do something to save him!"

It was perhaps natural that Hugh should not reason out the working of her mind. Jealousy obscured his usually clear perceptions, so that it only seemed to him that she was willing to sacrifice him to the chance of saving this limp and languid parody on manhood.

"It is always so," he reflected. "Women care only for light heads and light heels!"

And gazing at her with intense bitterness, he said:

"I will do what I can."

Then, transferring the Golden Serpent to Tiger Dick, he wheeled into the right pass.

"Hold!" cried the Tiger, realizing what he was about to attempt. "You are going to certain death!"

"That isn't always the worst of evils!" replied Hugh, spurring on.

Then Abigail realized that she had perhaps sent him to his death!

A moment she was breathless. She turned her eyes toward the approaching outlaws, who, on foot, had been left somewhat behind by the superior fleetness of the fugitives' horses.

Then her heart leaped to her lips in the cry:

"Hugh! Hugh! oh, Hugh!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

In the mad solicitude of that moment she would have wheeled her horse into the right pass, and followed him, but that Dick seized her bridle-rein and swept her horse along with his.

"Halt!" shouted the Tiger. "We must stop here and hold those fellows in check. What madness! A good man gone to save a mighty poor one! That's what I call throwing herring to catch sprat, with a vengeance! When we haven't a man to spare!"

This bitterness was called forth by a vivid realization of what it might mean to them all to lose so good a man as Hugh.

The Tiger, like most men of his class, was willing to meet death in a bold fight, but he had a keen contempt for ye daintie dude and for all of his kidney; and it was wormwood to him to feel that he was being sacrificed for so worthless a fellow.

He leaped from the saddle, laid the Golden Serpent, still insensible, on the ground, and turned to the defense of their position, drawing both revolvers.

"I'm with ye, my boy," cried Uncle Billy, cheerfully, as he ranged himself at the Tiger's side. "Dispose of me in the most advantageous manner. If I'll do best to stop up a breach in the wall, in I go!"

"Stay where you are, and make every shot count!" replied the Tiger. "Remember that this is no dress parade. We must get as many of those fellows ready for burial as possible."

"I'd rather vote 'em!" said Uncle Billy.

He was not insensible to the peril that threatened Hugh; but in his political life he had formed the habit of never losing the appearance of jolly content, no matter what the odds against his party.

Judge Littlejohn was not so collected.

"Can *nothing* be done?" he cried, appealing desperately to the Tiger.

"Put as much lead into those fellows as you can, and keep as much out of yourself as possible!" was the Tiger's epigrammatic direction.

"But, Mr. Cole?" persisted the Judge, anxiously. "Surely you will not leave him to perish in so noble an enterprise!"

"It's the price we pay for the privilege of being rid of the other fellow!" said Dick, with bitter cynicism.

It was plain that he was "mad."

The Judge, who, after all his dealings with degenerate and worthless humanity,

had not got over the habit of counting men by noses, looked at him blankly.

"We can't spare a man from this position," said the Tiger, a little more reasonably.

Then lowering his voice so that the woman should not hear him, he added:

"We shall probably be eaten up alive, as it is!"

"Benoni Spike!" screamed his affectionate spouse, "what are you doing shivering here, when every *man* is needed at the front?"

"But, Huldyl!" pleaded poor Benoni, "I never shot off a fire-arm in my life; even if I had any weapon, which I have not."

"*You!* Oh, no! There is no danger of your having *anything* that belongs to a *man*! If I don't put you in petticoats, once for all, if I ever get you back home, then my name's not Huldyl Spike!"

Still she had not the courage to volunteer to act in his stead. Secretly she was "mortally afraid" of anything that went off with a pop.

When it came to fencing with a jaw-bone, she could hold her own with the best of 'em. But that kind of warfare never drew blood.

Abigail was of better metal than either of her parents. She had her mother's pluck, tempered with her father's gentleness, each manifesting itself in a little different way.

"Give me a weapon!" she cried, to the Tiger. "Although a woman, I am not entirely useless. I have some skill with a revolver, and a human target will not unsteady my aim to-day!"

Her eyes blazed, her lips were compressed, her figure was drawn to its greatest height.

The half-conscious thought that prompted her words was that, in defense of her love, she could steel her woman's sensibilities to any act.

Dick gazed at her admiringly.

"Take this," he said, presenting her with a revolver. "We may need your help in the last extremity. But not now. Make it your business to keep under cover of these rocks, and do not think of mixing in the struggle until you see men coming through that pass. In that event, your greatest safety will lie in exposing your life boldly. Remember, *you* have nothing to hope from the mercy of those devils!"

The girl dimly comprehended what he alluded to, and with a shudder hardened her heart against all womanly weakness.

All this adjustment to their several positions did not take thirty seconds of time.

That interval had brought the outlaws once more within pistol-range.

The lieutenant was once more on his feet and at their head, the blood streaming over his passion-distorted face making him look the enraged fiend he was.

Dick's bullet had stayed him at a time when seconds were worth more than diamonds, but had not "bowled him out."

"Charge!" he shouted. "We'll have their heart's blood! There's two of 'em! Pick 'em up, boys!"

And they rushed forward to capture Hugh and ye hapless dude.

LISPINARD's fall had not deprived him of consciousness, though it must be confessed it had considerably mixed up his ideas—such as he had!

Covered with dirt—alas! his once immaculate shirt-bosom was a sight to weep at!—his clothes torn by cruel bramble and bush through which he had shot as if propelled by a catapult; with blood on both face and hands, and divers and sundry bruises on almost every part of his person; he scrambled to his feet, with the one idea that he must run with might and main.

In his bewilderment he took no thought of direction; and it was lucky for him that he did not.

If he had run away from the men of whom he was in such mortal terror, he would have put himself hopelessly beyond the reach of succor.

As it was, he rushed headlong toward them, thereby retracing in a measure, though on a lower level, the course over which his horse had borne him in the wrong direction.

Since the others bade fair to escape, the rage of the outlaws, fanned to fury by the contempt of rude men for effeminacy, centered upon this one left apparently in their power.

At him they rushed with glaring eyeballs and brandished weapons, curdling his blood with their savage execrations.

"Down the dude!"

"Cut his heart out!"

"Skewer the white-livered cuss!"

"Shoot the lights out of 'im—the lady's maid."

And white puffs of smoke and the crisp crack of revolvers showed that the will did not far outstrip the deed.

As the bullets whistled about his ears, sweet Lisperard stopped with eyes dilated and mouth agape, the picture of abject terror.

A moment so, while everything spun round, and the solid earth seemed to sink beneath his feet; and with a wild shriek he threw his hands up and fell forward on his face.

"He's killed!" cried Abigail.

Then her heart went out in a wild cry:

"Hugh! Hugh! come back! oh, come back!"

But, bent upon the accomplishment of the idea with which he had set out, Hugh did not heed her.

Upon seeing Lisperard thrown down the escarpment, he forced his horse to leap to the lower level.

It was a most hazardous thing to do. Nothing but a habit of implicit obedience, backed by the spur and an iron hand on the bit, compelled the animal to what its instincts told it would be destructive.

As it struck the ground, its legs collapsed as if they were straws, and the breath was knocked out of its body with an explosive groan.

Stung by what seemed to him the willingness of his lady-love to sacrifice him for another, and determined to show the quality of his devotion by a display of magnanimity which smacked rather of the sock and buskin than of real life, Hugh was in that mood when a man stops at nothing.

He fully realized the desperateness of the leap. It was neck or naught; with the chances decidedly in favor of a break in the neck and maybe in the way of accomplishment.

He threw his feet out of the stirrups, and dropped the rein; and seizing the pommel of the saddle, swung one leg over the back of the horse, so that he alighted on his feet beside him.

Of course he plunged forward on hands and knees, plowing the ground almost as handsomely as ye daintie dude had but the moment before.

However, in the excitement of the moment he was unconscious of the scratches and bruises he received; and he was on his feet again just in time to see Lisperard fall.

He heard Abigail call to him. He thought it was a cry of remorse at having included him in the sacrifice with the man she preferred.

He believed that Lisperard had been shot, and that to instant death; yet he would not give up the struggle with life.

"Dead or alive," he muttered between his set teeth, "she shall never have it to say that I left him there while there was a breath of life in my own body!"

Rushing forward, he plucked up the inanimate form and threw it over his shoulder. Under the spur of that whirlwind of excitement, he did it to all appearance as easily as if it were the body of a child.

Then he rose with his burden and sprung toward the retreat where his friends had found a present shelter.

Seeing their prey thus slipping through their fingers, the outlaws redoubled their efforts, yelling execrations and firing as they ran.

"Oh, gentlemen!" cried Abigail, fairly beside herself with excitement, "can we not go out and help him?"

And she herself would have rushed forth, revolver in hand, but that Tiger Dick restrained her.

"Stay, miss!" he said, forcing her back under shelter. "This is no work for such as you."

She sunk back, moaning:

"Oh! I have sent him to his death! I shall never forgive myself—never—never!"

Meanwhile Tiger Dick was not disposed to wait with folded hands. He was a man to appreciate the heroism of this other. He

was ready to do what could be done that it might not be fruitless, even to the hazarding of his own life.

"Come, gentlemen!" he cried. "We may make a sortie with advantage. *Don't* fire while in motion. Shots are worth something to-day!"

And springing through the opening in the barrier of rocks, he led the way.

Judge Littlejohn, whose real metal the emergency now called out, was at his heels.

If Uncle Billy was third, it was only because of his extra burden of flesh.

"It's money in a man's pocket to be a slab-sided Yankee in such times as these!" he said, as, puffing and blowing, he waddled after. "It's an advantage in both the advance and the retreat, egad! And then one don't spread such a broadside to the enemy. *That's* something!"

By this time Tiger Dick was half-way to Hugh.

"Bravely, old fellow! Never say die!" he shouted.

Then he came to a dead halt, crying:

"Now give 'em fire and brimstone!"

And by way of example, the Tiger opened fire with both revolvers.

Judge Littlejohn flanked him on one side and Uncle Billy on the other, with just enough open space to let Hugh pass between them with his burden.

Then such a hail of bullets as they sent into the ranks of the enemy was certainly never surpassed by three resolute men.

But Hugh was staggering. His face was ghastly pale, the features contorted by pain. It was plain that he had been hit, and that sorely.

"Keep it up, my boy!" cried Uncle Billy encouragingly. "We've staggered 'em! Ha! down they go! This is the game of tenpins that you read about!"

It was true. The outlaws were brought to a stand.

The Tiger, knowing the value of leaders, had made the lieutenant "his meat" once more, sending him "to grass," this time probably for good.

But the check was but momentary. Three men could not hold a score and more in an open field.

"Retreat!" he commanded, and was himself the last to yield, keeping his face to the enemy and firing as he went.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

YE CARPET KNIGHT AND YE CORSET.

Dick and the Judge came off without a scratch.

"They've tapped my wine-sack!" was Uncle Billy's laughing announcement of his less favorable fortune.

Yet, light as he made of it, his wound was a painful one, though not dangerous.

Meanwhile Hugh had staggered through the opening in the barricade.

Heedless of personal danger, Abigail sprung forward to meet him.

But no emergency could awaken in the breast of the Major-General sentiments generous enough to make her forgetful of her worldly schemes.

As long as there was a chance that sweet Lisperard might yet have the breath of life in his aristocratic body, and so was not beyond the responsibility of being converted into a son-in-law, she clung to the hope of securing through her daughter those social connections without which money failed to satisfy her.

So she seized Abigail as she passed, pouring into her ear the plea:

"For heaven's sake, try to contain yourself, and display a becoming maidenly reserve! Remember that these men—"

But with a glance of supreme indignation into her mother's face, the girl tore herself away.

"That headstrong creature will be the death of me!" moaned the Major-General, relapsing into the ordinary weakness of her sex, as she always did when her will was peremptorily thwarted.

But, acting out her own impulses, Abigail rushed up to Hugh, seized hold of him, and half dragged, half supported him into the shelter of the rocks.

It was only chance that took her to his left side, over which shoulder the limp body of the unconscious dude hung.

Still under the delusion into which his jealousy had hurried him, he thought that her solicitude was all for his rival.

"It is him that she is helping me carry to safety!" he reflected, bitterly, his mind so clouded with the dizziness that was overpowering him that he could scarcely formulate the thoughts. "She cares nothing for me. I may win her gratitude by my death! She will remember me with pity, perhaps, on her wedding day!"

And she?—she was choking with emotion. She tried to reproach him for his rashness, as we reproach those whom we love who have jeopardized our happiness by exposing themselves to danger. But the thought that she had him back again, within the very clasp of her trembling hands, when she had so feared to see him drop under the murderous bullets of those ruthless butchers, overcame her. She could only cling to him sobbing.

The rush of tears so blinded her that she did not see that he was suffering. It did not occur to her that he might have been hit. She had him back again, safe, as she supposed.

He laid down his burden at her feet. That was what he had set out to do, and it was accomplished.

He rose to look her in the face, and say that there was the gift of his love.

But everything grew dark. He could not see her. The solid earth seemed rocking under his feet. Strange sounds rung in his ears.

He brushed his hand across his face, and sunk forward, gasping:

"Abi—"

Then when she saw him reel like a drunken man, as she was about to cast herself upon his breast, clasping him about the neck and telling him how he had wrung her heart with fear—then she had her first warning that he had not come off scathless.

"Hugh!" she cried, with a great terror in her voice.

And throwing wide her arms, she received him on her breast as he fell.

She could not sustain his weight, but she eased him to the ground.

"Hugh!" she cried again, holding him in her arms—her fallen hero!—and bringing her face close to his, in an agonizing scrutiny of his bloodless countenance.

He did not answer. He did not hear her.

"He's dead!" she gasped, lifting her face piteously to those who gathered about.

"Dead! dead! I killed him!" she breathed, forgetful of her surroundings, and reverting only to him.

But his recumbent posture stayed the ebb of consciousness, as the blood which his enfeebled pulses failed to send to his brain when he stood erect, now found its way there by the aid of gravity.

His eyelids fluttered open; and his wavering gaze steadied itself, as if drawn by the magnetism of her eyes.

"Hugh!" she cried once more, now with great delight.

He heard her now. He knew the meaning of her wild cry. He realized that her arms were about his neck. He felt her panting bosom heave, as she drew his head upon it, holding him close, as a woman holds only her children, and one other, who is nearer to her than even they, if possible.

"Why, oh! why did you do it?" she cried.

With his face bathed by her tears, he smiled as he made answer:

"Because—because—I thought—thought—that you—loved him. And—I—I—"

The words died on his lips. His gaze wavered. The heavy eyelids drooped. The momentary flush which the delicious consciousness of her love had brought to his cheeks waned.

He was slipping away into unconsciousness, when Tiger Dick interposed.

"Lower his head again," he said.

"Oh, he is dying!" gasped Abigail. "Save him! save him!"

"It is only that the heart's action is too weak to supply the brain, with the head high," explained Dick.

He did not know but that Hugh was mortally wounded; but he thought to spare the girl her poignant distress if the worst should prove to be not at hand.

Seeing that Abigail would not yield her burden to him, he with gentle force pressed

her down with it, until the wounded man lay supine.

The effect was instantaneous.

Hugh revived, and concluded his sentence as if there had been no break:

"—loved you!"

"Oh, my darling!" cried the girl, pressing her first kiss upon lips that were too weak to respond.

With the true delicacy of a gentleman, Tiger Dick rose, feeling that he was an intruder here.

But a harsh, petulant voice grated upon those finer feelings.

"Abigail Spikel!" cried her mother, "I'm ashamed of you! How can you make such an exhibition of yourself?—not to mention the state poor Mr. De Morgan lies in! Oh! it will break my heart! I felt toward him almost as if he were my own son!"

She had her handkerchief alternately at her eyes and nose, while she bent over the prostrate dude. "Will *nobody* see if anything can be done?" she pleaded. "You, sir"—addressing Dick—"you seem to know something about such cases."

The Tiger cast a hurried glance, which showed him that Uncle Billy and Judge Littlejohn were holding the outlaws at bay by sending an occasional shot at them through breaks in their rampart of rocks, and then knelt to examine into Lispinard's condition.

He rose presently, after a hurried inspection, with an ejaculation of disgust.

"Have you a smelling bottle, madam?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!" cried the Major-General, producing it eagerly.

She had the pungent salts always by her for use when her exasperation with the Hon. Benoni took her to the verge of hysterics.

"Here it is, sir!"

"Hold it to his nose!" said Dick, dryly.

The sarcasm in his manner was too marked to be overlooked.

"What, sir!" cried the lady, flushing indignantly. "Can you be so unfeeling?"

"There is nothing the matter with him but over-refinement," said Dick, coolly.

"And he lying dead at your feet!"

"Far from it. He hasn't received a scratch."

"Then why does he lie there like that?"

"He has been frightened into a fainting-fit."

"Impossible!"

"Put your smelling salts to his nose, as I requested. I'll stake my reputation on the issue."

"I shall do no such thing! It would be an insult!"

"Not to that style of man."

"He is a *gentleman*, sir!" declared the Major-General, with an intonation that smacked of uncomplimentary significance.

"With an elegant form!" said the Tiger. "If you will kindly turn in another direction for a moment, I will resort to another common means of restoring persons similarly affected."

"And what means is that, may I ask?"

"Loosen his corsets."

"Corsets! Sir, you are insulting!"

"But truthful."

"Excuse me if I express a doubt—"

"You shall have the proof without delay!"

And kneeling, the Tiger ruthlessly disclosed the secret of sweet Lispinard's elegant figure!

Without further ceremony he took the helpless dude by the feet, and slewed him round, so that his head would lie lower than his body.

"He will come to without your aid, madam," he said, to the lady who now stood staring aghast.

And turning away, he again knelt beside Hugh.

"Oh! how thoughtless I have been!" cried Abigail, tremulously—"when something should have been done at once! Can you see where he is hurt and how seriously?"

"I'm not dead yet!" whispered Hugh, smiling at the Tiger.

But the effort drove the blood still more completely from his blanched lips.

"Perhaps you had better remove to a little distance" suggested the Tiger, to Abigail.

"Shall I be in your way? Can't I help you? Or—mustn't I see?"

"It is only that I wished to spare you the shock of the sight of blood."

"Oh! if that is all, I can stand it. I am brave. Try me! But can't I help you in some way?"

Her face was alight; her eyes were eager.

"The idea of throwing such a woman away on that larde-dah!" reflected Dick, with supreme disgust.

"We shall see presently," he said.

With the skill of one to whom such work was familiar, he examined Hugh.

He found a wound in the fleshy part of one arm.

After a moment's manipulation, he said:

"No bones broken. No important arteries cut. Can you open and shut your hand?"

Hugh essayed feebly.

"That's all right," said Dick. "A simple bandage will make that as good as new in a few days."

"Here is a bandage!" cried Abigail.

And switching round so as to face the other way, she tore a strip off the bottom of her skirt so quickly that the end was accomplished before Dick knew what she was about.

"A girl of a million!" reflected the Tiger, who liked people who were equal to emergencies without having to be instructed. "What a wife she'll make! There's only one other her peer!"

And his thoughts went away to that Eden in Lower California.

"We may have use for it presently," he said, turning Hugh over on his face.

He found his coat torn by several bullet-holes. Two rents in the skirts were of no consequence. But there was one almost in the middle of the back.

"Ah!" thought the Tiger. "Here's what the happiness of this poor girl turns upon."

He turned the coat up.

"Oh!" cried Abigail, in a long drawn, quivering moan.

There was blood in abundance.

With his knife the Tiger cut away the clothing.

He pressed his finger on a certain spot of the bloody surface.

The wounded man uttered a low moan.

With his handkerchief Dick stanching the flow of blood, and made a more careful examination.

"Well?" gasped Abigail, whose patience would not wait.

"I think we are coming off with a broken rib at most," said the Tiger.

"A broken rib!" repeated Abigail. "Then the bullet has not gone—"

"Through him? No; not quite! It's better luck than we had any right to expect. The wound is directly back of the heart, so it naturally makes him feel pretty bad just now. But when he recovers from the immediate shock he will brighten considerably."

"Thank God!" aspirated the girl, fervently.

"A little nip of this will fetch that heart back to its work," said Dick, producing a small flask from his pocket and presenting its mouth to Hugh's lips. "The least drop in the world. When it gets to taking irregular jig steps, it only wants a little coaxing to come round all right."

"Eh?"

This ejaculation was called forth by a sharp vocal summons, reinforced by a clutch on his shoulder.

"Mira, *senor*!"

Up to this point Dick had almost forgotten the masquerader, Don Giacomo.

As for the don, he had been cursing his luck ever since he found that he had run into the old snare again; and on the appearance of the Golden Serpent in proper person, he would have taken "French leave," with Spanish variations, had an opportunity to escape presented itself; but as it did not, he was forced to stand by his new allies. And as his safety depended upon theirs, he was faithful to their interests.

He was of questionable value as a fighting-man. Not but that he burnt powder freely enough. But he kept so well to the rear, and fired so recklessly, that he was almost as dangerous to friends as to foes.

But as a spy he was at home. He therefore was the first to discover what he now called the Tiger's attention to.

Dick looked up to see the Golden Serpent

sitting erect, staring at him, while she gathered her scattered wits.

During the sortie to the aid of Hugh and "ye daintie dude," she had lain where Dick had left her, stunned by her fall.

But now she had revived, and her glittering eyes showed that the old venom was beginning to stir. She was ready to coil for another deadly spring!

CHAPTER XXIX.

A LEAP FOR LIBERTY.

You may believe that it did not take the Golden Serpent long to grasp the situation; and she was on her feet as quickly as the Tiger himself.

"So!" she cried, gazing about her.

"Madam," said Dick, with his wonted politeness, "I am under the painful necessity of holding you under restraint for the present."

"What! A prisoner?" she cried, with tigerish scorn.

"I should prefer that you would consider yourself my guest."

"Hah! I spit upon you!"

Her eyes flashed round on the whole group, and returned to the Tiger.

She actually spat at him; and then, before even he thought of such a thing, she turned and leaped over the barrier of rocks.

"Good heavens!" cried Dick, for once thrown off his balance of imperturbable self-possession. "She'll have broken limbs to pay for that bit of feminine spitefulness, if nothing worse."

And he rushed to the rampart, expecting to see the Golden Serpent lying helpless at the base of the rocks.

But he was disappointed.

Pipa had leaped without looking. She had no idea what awaited her below; but, with the headlong recklessness of her passionate Spanish nature, she preferred death to the humiliation of remaining in the power of the man whom she now hated as madly as she had loved.

Fortune favored her; and Dick saw her scramble to her feet and make toward her men.

They received her with yells of delight.

"She will be a greater accession to them than a dozen men!" said Judge Littlejohn, regretfully.

"Still, we can't very well shoot her," observed the Tiger, quietly, divining his thought.

"We have women to defend; and she is as deadly an enemy as the most ruthless ruffian of her gang," persisted the Judge.

"No doubt," admitted the Tiger, as coolly as he would have yielded a point in political economy.

"Is this wise, then?"

"Judge," said Dick, turning and looking him squarely in the face, "you gentlemen of the bench sometimes hang women—for the protection of society, you say."

"And a very necessary defense it is," insisted the Judge, with a slight assumption of doggedness.

"As much so as in the present case," said Dick.

"Which seems to me extreme. Meanwhile, during our discussion, this particular offender is getting further and further away. If anything is to be done to stop her, it must be done at once."

His Honor spoke with impatience. It was plain that he was strongly disposed not to permit too fine scruples as to sex to interfere with the prudential requirements of the case. At the same time, he hesitated to do an act which, putting him in unfavorable contrast with his ex-road-agent, would not look well in the papers.

"Exactly," said Dick, still unmoved. "However, a different law holds out here, among men who have not the advantage of the civilizing influences of polite society. We don't shoot women—as a rule!"

The Judge flushed scarlet, and bit his lip.

"I wash my hands of the matter, whatever comes of it," he said, showing symptoms of sulkiness.

"But, my dear Judge," expostulated Billy, who never failed to respond to an appeal to gallantry, "a woman's a woman, after all. And when she's so demnition good-looking, what are you going to do about it? In my estimation, that's the only redeeming feature of the Jury System. It is especially adapted

to let shrewd rascals off, while it fastens with clamps of steel on any poor devil whose worst crime is his hard luck. But then the boys will never consent to spoil the looks of a handsome woman; and I forgive them all the rest of their stupidity for the sake of this one gentlemanly instinct."

Uncle Billy's regard for "his boys" was that not uncommon among politicians, a mingling of contempt and affection. He led men by the nose too much to thoroughly respect them; and yet they were good fellows.

But, having washed his hands of the matter, as he said, the Judge declined to pursue the discussion.

"Do you fancy that this position will prove defensible against a determined assault?" he asked, disparagingly.

"No," replied Dick, keeping his temper. "We shall have to retreat further up the rocks."

"And possibly fare worse," sneered the Judge.

Unaffected by his ill-humor, Dick glanced toward the mouth of the outlaw's retreat. But there was no sign of the coming of his men to his relief. No doubt it was too soon to expect them yet.

He turned to a hasty dressing of Hugh's wounds.

The stimulant he had administered had restored Hugh's heart to its wonted regularity of action; and he was now taking things as cheerfully as could be expected under the circumstances.

"If you can steady yourself on your legs, you will be able to walk with less pain than if carried," said the Tiger.

"Carried!" repeated Hugh, with fine scorn. "Wait until I call for the ambulance."

And to the surprise and delight of Abigail he stood erect, when helped to his feet, and smiled at her.

But she did not guess the excruciating pain that every slight movement, every breath drawn, cost him.

"What are they doing over there, Captain?" he asked of Dick, looking out over the pocket, to where the outlaws were rushing about, some in the direction of their camp, and some toward the entrance of the retreat.

"I have reinforcements outside," said Dick. "That pretty little Greaser has the wit to guess that I would not come here unsupported, if she has not more definite information; and her first move is to cut us off from help."

He had read the signs aright. This was indeed the Golden Serpent's first direction, the instant she got speech with her followers.

"Go!" she had cried. "These cannot escape us. We can dispose of them at our leisure. But hasten you to the mouth of the defile and cut off their friends. Let no living thing pass through, on your lives!"

"She is returning our consideration!" was Judge Littlejohn's sarcastic thrust.

"She's a clever little woman, as well as a handsome!" responded Uncle Billy, rubbing his hands with appreciation. "I tell you what it is, gentlemen! I'm going to vote for the first female candidate for the Presidency!—and I never scratched a ticket in my life before!"

The little band now began its retreat further up among the rocks.

Whether through fear, or for natural activity, Don Giacomo made himself conspicuous in this.

He was ever a little in advance of even the Tiger; and though Dick thought himself tolerably quick to perceive the advantages of a situation, yet on two occasions when he would have deviated from the Spaniard's lead, Don Giacomo pointed out certain features of the way which decided Dick to yield his own view.

On the third occurrence of the kind, however, this attracted Dick's attention.

"See here, Senor Monteverro!" he said, "it seems to me that you are unusually clever in mountain-craft, if indeed you are unfamiliar with this way."

A keen glance showed the Spaniard that he was under suspicion.

"Senor," he replied, "your doubts are too apparent to be mistaken. Will nothing convince you that I am not leading you to betrayal? If my hostility to the Golden

Serpent were assumed, would I carry it to the extent of aiding you to kill her men?"

"Well, that's a point, to be sure!" said Dick, frankly.

If caught in a tight place, he believed the Spaniard equal to even that treachery; but to make it a part of a deliberate plan, was another thing.

"If I had wished to betray you into the power of the Golden Serpent," pursued the Spaniard, "what opportunity better and safer than at the very moment when I aided you?"

"You make out a good case, senor," said Dick. "The worst skepticism ought to yield to such unanswerable facts."

"Lastly," persisted Don Giacomo, "what have I done? I have pointed out facts which you yourself might have discovered from my place in advance."

"True," admitted Dick.

Nevertheless he did not give himself over blindfold to the guidance of the plausible don.

A few steps further up they came to the mouth of a cave.

"Ah!" exclaimed Don Giacomo. "Here is a secure shelter, if we do not succeed in effecting our escape from the pocket."

The opening was in the face of an upright cliff, and the way from that point forward was more difficult—if at all practicable—than their course hitherto.

Don Giacomo pointed this fact out, with a look of uneasiness.

As before, Dick could not but admit the justice of his observations.

But somehow, the very certainty with which every point made was borne out by the facts, caused him a vague sense of disquietude.

"How does this fellow come to know so much about these things?" he asked himself.

Of course this was unreasonable. Don Giacomo's life, for aught he knew to the contrary, might have been such as to give him his knowledge legitimately.

Yet so little did Dick like the idea of giving up the purpose of making their way out of the glen, that, with the agility of a mountain goat, he scrambled among the crags on ahead, and then turned back over the way they had come, and assured himself that none of the courses he had before thought of led to anything more promising.

Finally he returned with the wonted impassive self-possession on his face, and said:

"We must stop here for the present. It will be impossible to get the ladies further in any direction under fire of the enemy."

"Do you propose that we enter the cave?" asked the Judge.

"I do," replied Dick.

"And wait?—for what?"

"For a better prospect to escape than just now offers."

"But if your friends fail you?"

"There is the chance of darkness—a slender one, I grant you."

"It seems to me, sir, that you have led us into a trap!" said the Judge, looking at Dick with the Olympian lightnings with which he was wont to cow a prisoner at the bar.

It didn't "go down" with Dick. He had "been there."

"I haven't bettered your condition much, for a fact," he conceded. "Need I say that I expected to, but that human calculations sometimes fail?"

"Yours seem to have failed signally in this case," urged the Judge, "bearing down" on the man whom he had at such a disadvantage.

"The game's not out yet," suggested Dick. "Maybe you're borrowing unnecessary trouble, my dear sir."

"I hope so!" said the Judge, shortly.

He made no reference to the Golden Serpent's having been permitted to rejoin her men, though it was apparent that that was what he had in mind.

"Hark!" exclaimed Dick, lifting his hand. He had caught the sound of a pistol report outside the robbers' retreat.

It was followed by an intermittent crackle which announced a lively skirmish.

"That's your fellows!" cried Uncle Billy, waxing excited.

"Yes," said Dick. "And good fellows they are, too. You may depend that all will be done that can be done."

The outlaws had disappeared in the defile

which gave admittance to their stronghold while our friends were climbing, and had evidently arrived in time to meet Dick's party at a point where the former had all the advantage.

At this moment a single report came from the glen below, closely followed by the "sping" of a bullet as it glanced from the crag just over the heads of our friends; and fragments of splintered rock fell at their feet.

"Get in! get in!" cried the Tiger, urging the others before him. "They have got rifles for sharp-shooting practice."

CHAPTER XXX.

A NEW PERIL.

"THEY'LL pick us off like crows from a scraggly limb!" cried Uncle Billy, with his never-failing laugh. "In! in! my dear De Morgan!"

"In there?" cried ye daintie dude, dismayed. "But it's dahk!"

"But it's darker down in Hades, they tell me!" responded Uncle Billy. "Meanwhile, you're blocking the way. Just remember, if you please, that a man of my bulk presents a very conspicuous target for rifle practice! Get in yourself, or let me pass you."

Even as he spoke another bullet went "zip!" by sweet Lispinard's ear, so close that he uttered a yelp, and plunged headlong into the mouth of the cave.

The Major-General had entered immediately in advance of him, and had stopped just within the line of obscurity, frightened at the rayless blackness.

The luckless dude plunged head-first into her; and the two "went to grass" in a heap.

Mrs. Spike shrieked wildly with terror, drowning ye dudie-doo's voluble apologies as he scrambled to his feet.

"Oh, you wretch!" she cried, when she came to understand the cause of her overthrow.

The instant the words passed her lips she knew that her hopes of alliance with the great house of De Morgan through this lily-fingered scion were shattered forever.

A man of his make would have but one strong point. He would never forgive an affront.

Well, now that the thing was beyond recall, the Major-General determined to have the satisfaction of giving him a square piece of her mind.

From day to day, as she saw her hopes being balked through his want of manliness, a force of pent-up exasperation had been accumulating against him. Now it burst forth like the sea through a crevasse.

"You wretch!" she cried again. "You unmanly tailor's dummy! You corset-wearing Miss Nancy! You faded-out water-color of a man!"

And with this introduction, she berated him until she threw herself into hysterics.

For the next minute and a quarter—an age under such circumstances—that cave was a pandemonium of demoniac sounds. Screams that set the nerves atingle alternated with shrieks of sardonic laughter, which the cavern multiplied with a thousand unearthly echoes.

Blent with them was the piteous expostulations of the Hon. Benoni and his equally unfortunate daughter.

Over this addition to their miseries, Judge Littlejohn grated his teeth, while sweet Lispinard reflected on mother-in-law.

Don Giacomo, familiar with the tempests in a tea-pot which the women of his own race are wont to "kick up," took the matter quite philosophically.

Uncle Billy walked to the mouth of the cave with the Tiger.

"Eh? Ain't I the happiest of mortal men?" he chuckled, slapping his hands about his body, after the manner of a hack-driver on a cold day.

"What do you find to rejoice over in our present situation?" asked Dick.

"The reflection that I'm not attached to an angel—an angel of the household, ye know!"

"What! so ungallant a speech from you? I'm shocked and surprised!"

Uncle Billy winked wickedly.

"Do you kiss a dirty-faced baby because you like to, or because its mother is looking on?" he asked.

When she had exhausted herself with

shrieking, the Major-General's malady took on the lackadaisical phase.

"Benoni," she sighed, "do you love me?"

"Oh Lord!" groaned Uncle Billy. "Now we are going to have it!"

"Yes, my dear, yes," replied the long suffering Benoni. "Have I ever given you reason to doubt it, Huldy?"

"You have been a good husband to me, Benoni—far better than with my imperfect nature I have deserved.

The Major-General began to sob like a man in his cups.

"I know my many failings!" she sighed. "I have been a sore trial to you at times! When I am gone will you—will you—Ahoo oo-oo!"

And her words died away in a doleful howl of misery.

"Don't, mother!—please don't!" pleaded Abigail, in a low tone.

"There is no use in trying to disguise it. I feel that I am not long for this world. And you—you are breaking my heart!"

At thought of the scheme that had that day gone to wreck, the Major-General set up a most harrowing wail.

"Huldy," interposed her husband, knowing from sad experience how easy it was for the Major-General to pass from the miserable sinner to the martyred angel, and wishing to spare his daughter, "let us hope for better things. There are many days of happiness yet awaiting us, if we only try to make them so."

"No!—there is no more happiness for me not on this earth!" wailed the Major-General. "But I suppose my afflictions are sent upon me for my good. However, it is nearly over. I am going to my rest!"

"What a rest it will be for that miserable man!" interjected Uncle Billy to the Tiger, guardedly.

"Don't speak so, my dear!" pleaded the Honorable Benoni. "You're not going to die."

"Oh, yes I am!" persisted the Major-General. "And I am ready to go. Pray for me, Benoni."

And that monumental exemplar of patience to all husbands blessed with hysterical wives, complied!

Slowly the sobs and moans of the suffering angel died away, until the deep darkness and death-like silence of the cave became so oppressive, that those who ventured to break it with their voices spoke almost in whispers. So the hours passed.

The fighting outside the retreat had ceased, and no open demonstration was being made by the outlaws against the prisoners in the cave.

"But I'll bet my district against any other in the State, that that woman isn't asleep!" said Uncle Billy, with confidence. "I hope your friends are equally wide awake."

"Let the event show," said the Tiger, quietly.

"Eh!" ejaculated Uncle Billy, sharply. "What's that?"

A swishing sound, as of something sliding down the face of the cliff, had caught his ear.

"Look out!" cried Dick, warningly, as the politician was about to pass the mouth of the cavern, to investigate the source of the sound.

"You mean, *don't* look out," laughed Uncle Billy, as he desisted from his purpose.

"I mean that that may be a decoy to draw some one within range of a bullet."

"Not a bad idea! But—What?"

A dark object fell before the mouth of the cave, and lodged directly in sight.

"Why!" exclaimed Uncle Billy, "it's nothing but a bit of mountain-moss that has fallen from above. That's innocent enough."

"That," said the Tiger, with a sudden recession of color from his face, "is one of the most terrible objects I have ever witnessed!"

"What! An armful of mountain moss? What sort of a conun— Eh! My dear sir! You startle me! What is it?"

There was reason for Uncle Billy's anxiety. Tiger Dick stood staring through the mouth of the cave like one fascinated.

"See!" he cried, pointing, as another tuft of moss fell before the opening, and increased the little heap of that which had preceded it.

"Well?" said Uncle Billy. "It is moss, isn't it?"

"It is death!" replied the Tiger, suddenly dropping his voice so low that there was no danger of those within overhearing him.

"Death!" repeated Uncle Billy, amazed and bewildered.

"In one of its most horrible, most agonizing forms!"

"But how?"

"By suffocation!"

"Pshaw! They can't smother us that way!"

Uncle Billy stared at the Tiger as if he thought he had taken leave of his senses.

"Look you!" exclaimed Dick, suddenly clutching the wrist of the other. "You are a man of coolness and of fertility of resource. Your life has schooled you in both of these. Perhaps something may occur to you. I confess that for once all avenues seem closed to me. Believe me, it is not for myself that I am concerned. But I have led you all into this trap. And when I think of these women who have confided so blindly in me—"

For once Tiger Dick was mastered by excitement.

"But why all this alarm?" cried Uncle Billy, unable to make him out.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE GOLDEN SERPENT'S DEMAND.

"Don't you see?" cried the Tiger, passionately. "Suppose they set fire to those— See! This time it is a pine bough."

"Good heavens!" cried Uncle Billy. "You don't mean to say that they are going to smoke us out?"

"Smoke us out!" repeated the Tiger. "Can we get out?"

"Through the blaze? That won't be so easy if they pile boughs and moss so as to close the opening."

"Do you think that that is all? Look here!"

Dick stepped to the mouth of the cave, and stood looking out over the pocket.

He had hardly taken his position when Uncle Billy's ears were greeted by the almost simultaneous discharge of several rifles, and Dick fell to the ground as if struck by lightning.

"My God!" cried Uncle Billy. "Was there ever anything so foolhardy?"

While the words were in his mouth he heard the patter of a shower of bullets that flattened themselves against the rock.

"That is what awaits us on the other side of the blaze," said Dick, as gathering himself up on his knees, he crept back into the cave.

"What! You are not hurt?" cried Uncle Billy, in astonishment.

"Not that I am aware of," replied Dick, coolly.

"I thought you were killed outright!"

"That I had deliberately put myself out there as a target, intending to wait for their bullets? Luckily, lead doesn't travel as fast as sound, nor sound as fast as light. I saw the flashes of their guns. There was plenty of time between that and the arrival of their compliments to get out of the way. I only wanted to show you how prompt they were."

"Prompt enough, in all conscience!" panted Uncle Billy.

"Well, what is to be done? We can't stay here and wait for death; and to go out there, you see, is only to go to meet it."

"Alternatives offering little choice."

"Have you nothing to suggest?"

"A parley," said the politician.

"What sort of terms do you think that woman will grant us?"

"A woman in power is always a tyrant. Bless 'em! it's so seldom they have the chance, I don't blame 'em much for making the most of it."

While speaking, the Tiger had become outwardly calm again. But it was the calm of iron resolve, not indifference.

"Whatever her exactions," he said, as if he foreboded that they would bear not lightly upon him, "I will accede to them. Meanwhile, let the first overtures come from her."

The accumulation of combustibles before the mouth of the cave went steadily on, until the opening was almost entirely blocked.

"Do you suppose she will give us a

chance to capitulate?" asked Uncle Billy, with more anxiety than he had hitherto evinced.

Before the Tiger could reply, a shrill scream came from within the cave, followed by the rush of hurrying feet.

"Good heavens! what now?" cried Uncle Billy.

The Major-General appeared, stumbling through the darkness, with sweet Lispinard and the Hon. Benoni struggling for precedence at her heels.

All of them were evidently half-frightened out of their wits.

"Well?" said the Tiger, with some show of impatience.

"They're in there!" gasped the Major-General. "We shall all be killed!"

"In where?" asked Dick, betraying no disturbance.

"In there—in the cave!" panted ye daintie dude. "They're calling for you."

"Oh, sir! why did you bring us to this horrible place?" sobbed Mrs. Spike.

Without answering them, Dick walked back into the cave.

"What's the trouble now?" he asked, of any one who chose to enlighten him.

"Some one has called to you," said Abigail, in a tremulous voice.

She too had been frightened, but had not thought of abandoning the side of her lover, whose hand she held, while he lay trying to hide his pain from her.

His pulses were throbbing with fever, but knowing it was impossible to get water, he made no intimation of the thirst that was tormenting him.

"Who calls?" demanded the Tiger, in a loud voice.

"Tiger Dick!" came in muffled tones, which the echoes made it impossible to locate.

"I attend you. Who are you, and what do you want?"

"Do you not recognize my voice? I am the woman you have so infamously betrayed!"

"I have betrayed no one," replied Dick. "I gave you no pledge, and was not bound to remain inactive while you forced your services upon me."

"We will not discuss that point now. There is other matter which you will find more vital."

"Where are you?" asked Dick, curious to locate his interlocutor, so as to guard against surprise.

"Almost directly over your head," replied the Golden Serpent. "There is an opening in the top of the chamber in which you stand, through which you might see the light, were it not so tortuous."

"Well, what have you to say?"

"Do you know what is going on before the cave?"

"Your inhuman intentions are only too manifest!"

"They are as implacable as malicious, believe me!"

"Then what interest can I have in them?"

"Are all the people with you within the sound of my voice? I would have them all know what is before them. The decision may not rest solely with you."

"They are all here, of course."

"Even to the arch-traitor, Don Giacomo Monteverro?"

"Since there is no concealing his identity, we might as well admit it. He too is here, without the pluck, I fancy, to answer for himself."

Even that contemptuous thrust brought no response from the Spaniard. He might be cursing to himself, or praying, or both alternately.

"You know then," pursued the Golden Serpent, "that by firing the moss and pine boughs I have caused to be thrown before the mouth of the cave, I can fill the chamber in which you stand with suffocating smoke. I can inflict on you the most miserable of deaths."

This was the first warning to all but Uncle Billy and the Tiger.

Exclamations came from all sides, and eager questions.

In a few words Dick explained the situation fully, and then answered the Golden Serpent aloud:

"Granting all you say, what then?"

"Whether the torch is put to that pile or

not, depends on your decision on the terms I am about to propose."

"State them."

"Against the people who are strangers to me, who have not injured me in the past, and probably will never injure or benefit me in the future, I have no grudge."

"That's kind of her!" interjected Uncle Billy, *sotto voce*.

"I secured them as instruments to a purpose. When they cease to serve my purpose, I shall release them with indifference to their future fate."

"Confound her! I call that cool! She might wish us well out of the scrap!" muttered the incorrigible humorist.

"But," pursued the Queen of the Road-Agents, throwing an iron hardness into her voice, "as means to an end, I would grind them to powder, if necessary, in its accomplishment."

"With my past experience of your character, I have no doubt of your capabilities in the way of merciless self-seeking," said the Tiger, as she paused.

"Then make the people with you understand that they are to me as so many counters in a game which I am playing. If I lose the game, I will toss them into the fire, in my annoyance!"

"Was there ever such a wretch!" breathed sweet Lisperard, faintly. "My dear sir, submit to anything she proposes."

"I'd like to have that vixen in a corner with her back hair down just for one mortal minute!" thought the Major-General.

"I think none of us need any further assurance of your cruelty," said the Tiger, dryly.

"Very well! Now for my purpose. It was to purchase the liberty of Tiger Dick, with my own life, if need were! It is to have his life, if I have to wade to the lips in innocent blood to get it! No man shall scorn me as he has scorned me, and not know an outraged woman's revenge!"

"How horriole!" shuddered Abigail, with her lips close to Hugh's ear.

She was clinging to his hand, as to that of her natural protector.

Hugh inly groaned over his inability to help her, at this moment of all in their lives!

"And now," asked Dick, coolly, "what do you have to propose?"

"I call upon these people to cast out their Jonah! Give up Tiger Dick to my revenge; and the rest of you shall go free."

"That's a very straight-forward proposition," said Dick, to his companions. "What do you say to it?"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TIGER'S DICK'S ULTIMATUM.

"It is the wickedest thing I ever heard!" burst forth Abigail, with generous ardor.

Then lifting her voice so as to be heard by the Golden Serpent, she went on:

"I cry you shame! You must think very meanly of us, to believe that we would profit by such cowardly treachery. Do you forget that Mr. Langley has jeopardized his life to save us; and the sun has not yet set on the debt we owe him?"

"Miss Spike," said Dick, with feeling, "I have to thank you for your generosity!"

"There is nothing generous about that," replied the girl. "It is common humanity—common decency, indeed!"

"One vote for rejection," said the Golden Serpent, coolly. "What say the rest of you?"

"If you had only accepted in good faith her arrangement with the Governor, instead of rousing her resentment!" breathed sweet Lisperard.

"Shame! shame!" cried Abigail. "Mr. De Morgan, you astonish me! I would not have believed you capable of anything so unworthy!"

From the force of habit, perhaps backed by her own feeling, the Major-General sprung to his defense.

"I am sure there is no occasion for your severe criticism of Mr. De Morgan!" she protested. "He has intimated nothing but the truth. It was an act of culpable foolhardiness to attempt our release in so reckless a manner, when it could have been effected without risk!"

Abigail made no audible reply; but in the darkness the blood streamed over her face, with shame for her mother; and she clung with sudden vehemence to her lover's hand, as she breathed into his ear:

"Oh, Hugh!"

He drew her face down to his, and kissed her noiselessly.

"I am proud of you, dear!" was his reward and his consolation.

"Two evidently wish to lighten the ship!" said the voice of the Golden Serpent.

Then a ripple of sarcastic laughter came down through the opening.

While she read ye daintie dude's sheer pusillanimity, she had the womanly wit to see that Mrs. Spike was influenced more by her pique against her daughter.

With all her faults, the woman would not have accepted such a sacrifice with comfortable self-justification, as would the shivering coward in whose defense she had spoken.

"I hope there is no doubt as to my position in this matter," said Hugh. "The thing seems to me too infamous to be seriously answered."

The information that Abigail returned the compliment, surely needs no more definite allusion!

"What is it you *Americanos* say? *Two and one!*" laughed the Golden Serpent.

"Papa, you would not listen to such a thing?" cried Abigail, anxious to have her father on the right side, and so hastening to bolster up his timidity.

"No, my dear," replied the Hon. Benoni.

But his voice trembled. He spoke like a man who felt that he was signing his own death-warrant.

Judge Littlejohn spoke next.

"While I can but concur with Mrs. Spike and Mr. de Morgan, in viewing Mr. Langley's exposure of us to needless danger as wholly inexcusable," he said, as speaking from the bench; "still, now that the folly is beyond recall, we cannot escape the consequences in such a way. For the gratification of your love of hair-brained adventure, you had no right, sir, to involve the lives of women, not to say of men, whose habits of life would lead them to feel no sympathy with such a course."

"You quite misjudge my motives," replied Dick, with perfect self-possession.

No man living could "sit down" on him.

"It was not from love of reckless enterprise, as you say, but from a determination not to profit by crime, that I refused to accept my liberty as the price of your restoration."

"My faith!" cried the Golden Serpent, with affected surprise, "what is the world coming to? Here are people vying with one another to see who shall sacrifice life most eloquently! Do you realize that it is Tiger Dick *with* you, or Tiger Dick *without* you, but Tiger Dick in *any* event? Do you love him so, that you all court the suttee in his company?"

"If the reports are all in," said Uncle Billy, in a tone altogether new for him, "I shall like to have a vote in this matter."

Then lifting his voice, he went on:

"Craving the indulgence of the ladies present, I believe I express the general sentiment when I say: Madam, we'll see you *hanged* first!"

What! Uncle Billy having recourse to 'French,' as if English were not adequate to the expression of his feelings!—and in dead earnest, too!

Certainly no one present had ever known him to manifest such feeling before. Now, but for the darkness, they might have seen that his eyes flashed, and his face was flushed.

The man was indignant—and *showed it!*

"That from a politician!" cried the Golden Serpent, sarcastically. "I pray you, senor, do they cultivate so delicate a sense of morality in the ward meetings in Frisco?"

"But you will die in good company, my friend Dick! Come! you have the wit to say something as pretty as they, before I bid you farewell!"

"I have but this to say: I accept your terms."

"Spoken like Senor Hameeltonn, and like no other!" cried the Golden Serpent, her voice vibrating with enthusiasm. "As bitterly as I hate you, I will yet do you the

justice to say that no man I have ever known has so commanded my admiration by every act and word!"

Those within the cave set up a murmur of astonishment, which was also dissent with some of them.

"Mr. Langley, you shall not do this thing!" cried Abigail.

"No, Dick," corroborated Hugh. "Generosity, like everything else, must find a limit in reason."

"Begad, sir, there'll be two of us!" cried Uncle Billy.

"Stay a moment," said Dick. "This is not so unreasonable as it may appear to you at first glance. My life was forfeit to the law. But for me none of you would have been here. When I had the opportunity to free you by accepting my own liberty, I refused. If I had merely refused, you might have been restored to freedom when it became apparent that no good would come of detaining you. But, blinded by the thought of winning my release in a way acceptable to me, I have involved you in this new peril. Lastly, I let the enemy who is now threatening your lives escape, when a shot would have ended her malice."

"All of which was most noble in you!" cried Abigail. "I, for one, honor you for breaking the iniquitous bargain between this woman and the Governor! And I think you were right in not shooting her in cold blood, wicked as she is."

"We probably should never agree in this argument," said Dick, in reply to Abigail and the earnest protest which the more generous of the others urged. "I thank you all. However, I shall give myself up to the Golden Serpent, and you shall go free."

He spoke with the quiet determination which was peculiar to him. It ended all expostulations. Those who would have held him back were powerless before his will.

"It is agreed, then?" asked the Golden Serpent.

"Did you ever know me to trifle?" asked Dick.

"Never! But you have not heard the requirement yet."

"It will make no difference, whatever it is."

"It is this: I have resolved upon your death, and by my hand. Nothing short of that will wipe out the repeated insults you have put upon me. However, as I have said, I admire you while I hate you. I do not desire an unworthy death for such a man. You shall die the death of a soldier. I shall shoot you through the heart!"

"So be it!" said Dick. "The sooner it is over, the better I shall be pleased."

"Are you ready at once?"

"At once!"

"Good! That is a soldier's promptness!"

"But something has been overlooked. A certain individual has been keeping in the shade to an extent remarkable for even one of his modesty. As I have said, I have no grudge against the strangers; but with Don Giacomo it is a different matter."

"He knows that I have been very generous to him in the past—altogether too generous to have him play me this trick. I thought he would take my silence as quittance of his just grievance against me; but since he has chosen to reopen the account between us, I now propose to pay him in full."

Don Giacomo now found his voice.

"*Madre de Dios!* senor, do not yield me to her rage!" he gasped.

And groping his way to Dick, he groveled at his feet like a dog.

"Don Giacomo came here by my insistence," said Dick. "He must be allowed to go free with the others. I promised him my protection, and I will not now betray him."

"Ah, *gracias*, senor! The world has not seen your like for integrity!" whined the natural-born sycophant.

"This is a part of the terms I offer," insisted the Golden Serpent. "It is Don Giacomo, or fire! smoke! death!"

"Let it be the latter, then," said Dick as quietly as before. "You should not have my worst enemy, against my plighted word, if the world were in the balance!"

"That is final?" asked the Golden Serpent.

"That is Tiger Dick's ultimatum!"

"What say the rest of you? Will you throw the cringing wretch in woman's clothes over the rocks?"

Even sweet Lisperard could not propose to sacrifice this man whose only fault, so far as they were concerned, was that he had risked his life for them.

"Very well!" said the Golden Serpent, in response to the silence. "I commend you to the saints to sustain your fortitude. Believe me, it will be sorely tried!"

Five minutes later an ominous crackling warned those within the cave that the dread moment was at hand.

They were frozen to the silence of despair. The cave was as still as a deserted tomb.

The draught sucked a cloud of smoke into the cave.

Sweet Lisperard was the first to cough.

At the sound, the Major-General sent up a wild shriek of terror.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SACRIFICE.

LET us pass quickly over the scene of human misery and human weakness that followed. Few of us are endowed largely with the fortitude which sustains the heroic in the hand-to-hand grapple with death.

What if a woman, mad with pain and the terror of passing into the shadow of the unknown, broke into ungenerous reproaches? What if a man lost for a time that command over the emotions that we demand of him by reason of his sex?

Not his own sufferings, but the wretchedness that surrounded him, made Tiger Dick at last, when it seemed as if no more was supportable by human nature, cry out:

"Senor Monteverro, death cannot come to you in more horrible form than this. I refuse to betray you, in accordance with my pledge, but have you not the generosity to free these innocent people, when nothing can be gained by including them in your misfortune? Even to you and me, death in any other form, seeing that it is inevitable, will be a boon."

No reply came to his appeal.

"Speak, I beg of you!" cried the Tiger. "If you have not the manliness to take upon yourself that which comes to you, at least avow it openly."

All held their breath, to hear life awarded or death decreed to them.

The grave-like silence was only broken by the crackle of the twigs burning at the mouth of the cave.

"Coward!" shouted the Tiger, in a rage at what he thought the poltroonery of the Spaniard. "At least we will see your face!"

And he struck a match.

The spectacle revealed by the feeble flame was one to shake the stoutest heart.

Of that wretched company, all lay with their faces close to the floor of the cavern, as Dick had directed them to do, that the last agony might be deferred as long as possible.

The smoke which filled the chamber was not the white cloud that rises from smudge wood, the combustion of damp materials, but that blue vapor which is equally devoid of life-sustaining oxygen. Therefore, the view was not greatly obstructed.

Tiger Dick, even with his stout heart, shuddered as he gazed about into the ghastly faces upturned to his.

There was a half-insane appeal in some of them, as if merely to see the light once more gave birth to new hope.

Some wore the iron mask of dark despair.

But among them all, where was that of the man who alone could save them by a sacrifice of himself—if, indeed, it could be called a sacrifice to choose between alternatives equally fatal?

Don Giacomo was nowhere to be seen.

"The traitor has abandoned us!" cried the Tiger, when he had assured himself that the Spaniard was indeed gone out of the chamber.

"How could he have escaped?" asked Uncle Billy. "He could not go through the fire."

"There is treason somewhere," answered the Tiger. "I have suspected him from the beginning. He knew too much about this neighborhood."

"Then why are we suffering like this?" wailed the Major-General, piteously. "It is only on his account. Oh, I can't endure this

any longer! I'll throw myself into the flames and end it so!"

She staggered to her feet in mad desperation, and started toward the exit.

"Stop! in God's name, madam!" cried the Tiger, clutching her arm and detaining her. "I will signal to those without and make terms with them."

"Anything! anything!" cried the woman, fiercely. "You have no right to keep us imprisoned here. Judge Littlejohn, is one voice to decide our fate? I say, let us bargain with this female devil, if we must. What is this one of her own treacherous race, that we should all die so miserably for him?"

No one answered her.

The Tiger fired off his revolver several times in rapid succession.

"Well, my gentle Tiger," said a voice from above, so promptly that it was evident that the Golden Serpent had waited there for some sign of yielding from her victims, "is your savage spirit being tamed a little?"

"It is not to my spirit, or want of spirit, that you owe a willingness on my part to reopen negotiations," replied Dick. "It is to the infamy of a fellow, accountable only from the fact that his veins run with the same blood that prompts your ruthless cruelty. Don Giacomo has deserted us, doubtless by your connivance. That leaves you with no excuse for refusing to accept my life alone and release these people, against whom you have no reason for complaint."

"Don Giacomo has deserted you? How could he? I connive at his escape? Let me get him within my clutch, and you shall see my love for him!"

"In any event, he is not worthy the sacrifice that is being made for him. I give myself up to your revenge; and you are at liberty, for all my interference, to catch him if you can. This is all that I could have granted you when you made the demand; so now you have no justification for continuing this torture."

"I will prove to you my sincerity, by ordering the immediate withdrawing of the fire. You have your own obstinacy—scruples, if you prefer—to thank for what—"

"Lose no more time! Give these people air at once!"

"Listen; and you shall hear the order!"

All listened with bated breath.

They could hear the Golden Serpent give the signal to her men.

"We are saved! saved! saved!" shrieked the Major-General, hysterically.

A moment later the men could be heard raking the embers away from before the mouth of the cave.

"Air! air! air!" panted Abigail, faintly. "Hugh! dear Hugh!"

She had crept into his arms, so as to breathe out her last of life on his breast.

They felt the first breath of cooler, purer air. It was the elixir of life. The ejaculations of delight were without restraint.

Hope unlocks the lips that despair has sealed.

They were about to rush through the passage to the open air, when they were stayed by the Golden Serpent.

"Hear me!" she cried. "No one is to pass the mouth of the cave until Tiger Dick has paid my debt of revenge! Any one showing himself or herself at the opening before permission is granted will be shot on the instant!"

"What more do you want of us?" shouted Judge Littlejohn, in a rage.

"Nothing," replied the Golden Serpent. "I would not have troubled myself to wait here until you came to your senses, if you alone were concerned. You have my desire for personal revenge on Tiger Dick to thank both for your sufferings and for your release. You can get air enough while remaining in the passage, near the mouth. Meanwhile, Tiger Dick shall take up his position before the mouth of the cave, facing outward, and await my vengeance."

"It is a trick, to release him and keep us confined!" cried the Major-General, hotly.

"You shall see whether it is a trick or not!" replied the Golden Serpent.

"I have but one consideration to ask," observed the Tiger.

"And that?"

"Make it as short and sharp as possible."

"You shall have a soldier's death, as becomes you," said the Golden Serpent. "I am as glad as you can be, not to have to smother you like a dog. I mean to shoot you with my own hand."

"I await you," said Dick.

Then he turned to his companions in suffering, when they had all got in the light and air near the mouth of the cave.

"I ask your pardon for the misery I have been the involuntary means of entailing upon you," he said. "It seemed to me that honor demanded its endurance. That is my only plea in extenuation."

He did not offer his hand in parting. Was there any there who would take it? They had good reason to refuse. Besides what they had suffered through him, he was yet under the ban of the law, as an unpunished outlaw.

One did not wait. One did not think of these things. The heart of one spoke with native generosity.

"Oh, Mr. Langley!" cried Abigail, clasping his hand, "is this unavoidable? *Must* you die, here, before our very eyes?"

Dick pressed her hand warmly.

"You are very kind!" he said, with feeling. "It emboldens me to ask a service at your hands—such as only one with your warm heart could perform well."

"Oh, if I *could* do anything for you! If I could only save you!"

"That is impossible," said Dick, quietly. "I know the Golden Serpent. She will carry out her purpose."

"Let me go out and plead with her! Surely, she has a woman's heart!"

"But all women's hearts are not alike," said Dick, with a smile. "If they were all as brave, yet gentle, as yours, I am sure there would be less unhappiness in the world. No, you cannot save me; but you can make it easier somewhat for me to die."

"I will do it—anything!"

Dick turned to Hugh.

"You have a voice in this matter," he said. "I congratulate you that it is so."

"Make your terms with Abigail," said Hugh, with a glance at his beloved that brought the rich color into her cheeks. "Her wishes are to be my only care, even if I were not as desirous as she to do for you everything that can be done."

"There is one who will grieve for me beyond the ordinary grief of bereavement," said Dick, with a proud, glad look in his eyes. "I want you to be her consoler, as I feel that you can be."

"Don't form your opinion of her by what you may know of my wretched life. She is in every way worthy to be the sister of your affections."

"Oh! I am sure of it!" cried Abigail.

"Let me give my last message into your ear alone. If I had the means of writing—"

He did not complete the sentence, but she knew that he felt it almost a sacrilege to transmit this last cry of his heart through any human being.

He took the girl apart and began to tell her that last message.

He began hesitatingly and with emotion, but as he progressed the words came feverishly, and at last with an impetuous rush.

It would be impossible for any one to remember a hundredth part of the things he poured into her ear.

As that wild flood of passion swept over her, the girl was so overcome by this vision into such a heart as she had never dreamed of, that she scarcely comprehended what he said.

She only knew that with the partial opening of the floodgates of his soul, this man of iron self-control lost entire mastery over himself.

He choked; tears started from his eyes; he adjured her in the language of passionate appeal not to forget this, to be sure to remember that, by no means to fail to convey this assurance, or that pledge.

He clung to her hand, and she felt him shaken in every nerve.

Would he never have done? She felt as if she would swoon from the overmastering force of his emotion.

A rifle-shot from without summoned him, and he broke off abruptly.

"Good-by to you all!" he said, as he hastened to respond to the Golden Serpent's impatience.

He did not know who or how many clasped his hands for an instant as he passed among them.

He left behind him a girl sighing and sobbing, and scarcely conscious.

Once more he stood out under the open sky, to look his last upon the beautiful earth and the sun just setting among the mountain-tops.

How indifferent is Nature to our pain! The world smiled as if on a happy nuptials! Just over his head a bird trilled the last sweet notes of its vesper hymn to the departing day!

In the glade below him stood the Golden Serpent, leaning on a carbine. About her were grouped her scowling ruffians.

"I am here!" said the Tiger, in a clear, strong voice.

Now he stood like a statue of iron. Who would have thought that this man could be so perturbed as he had been but a moment ago?

The Golden Serpent gazed upon him, and her heart leaped with a wild throb of admiration and delight.

"Tiger Dick," she said, "even in this last moment I offer you a reversal of my purpose—you know on what conditions!"

"Fire!" said Dick, gazing at her coldly. The woman trembled from head to foot.

"It is my last offer!" she said, in a choking voice.

"Bah!" cried the Tiger.

But suddenly he checked his anger.

"Stay!" he said. "I would not have my last thought of you!"

Not changing the position of his body, which presented his breast squarely to her aim, he turned his head so as to look southward.

His face softened. Over his lips was breathed the name:

"Beatrice!"

With a savage Spanish oath the Golden Serpent dropped upon one knee, and resting her elbow on the other, to form a rest for a steady aim, brought her carbine to bear on the motionless figure that waited her vengeance.

A moment of wavering. Then the sights came in a line with his heart.

Another breathless instant! Then a puff of white smoke and a sharp report that was repeated from crag to crag!

The bird's song came to a startled conclusion, and the songster flew upward.

Tiger Dick clutched at his breast as if he would tear a scorpion from his heart; and then, with a single gasp fell forward on his face!

The Golden Serpent sprung to her feet with a cry of horror. It seemed as if but now she realized what she had done.

"Dead! dead!" she panted.

Then turning to her men, she cried:

"Follow me! We may save him!"

She rushed forward, they following at her heels in a body.

As they neared the mouth of the cave, there lay the motionless body. Her aim had been only too sure. He had not so much as quivered after striking the ground.

"Dick! Dick!" cried the Golden Serpent, springing forward to cast herself on the body of the man she had loved and hated so fiercely, and whom she now grieved with as frantic a passion.

But before she reached him, to usurp the place that belonged only to the woman who was waiting all unconsciously in Lower California, she started back with a cry of dismay.

She had had her revenge; but now what?

CHAPTER XXXIV.

TIGER DICK'S GOOD ANGEL.

OUT from the cave rushed, not a group of prisoners trembling between hope and fear as to the good faith of the arbiter of their fate, who had exacted so cruel a ransom, but a band of armed warriors.

Jim Farnsworth was in advance, with Captain Kidder at his heels. Behind them followed the boys, every one of whom loved Tiger Dick as if he were a brother.

Taken wholly unawares, the Golden Serpent and her men stopped and stared.

"Surrender, boys! We've got you!" shout-

ed Captain Kidder, while his men, with revolvers bristling in either hand, set up a yell of resentment at the sight of the Tiger's inanimate body.

Jim Farnsworth sprung upon the Golden Serpent. In her extreme agitation over the work of her evil passions, it took a moment for her to collect herself sufficiently to realize the change in the situation.

But then, with a snarl of rage and defiance she plucked a stiletto from her bosom, and struck at the life of her would-be captor.

But Jim Farnsworth had handled her like before. He caught her wrist and disarmed her; and then, though she writhed like a serpent, and scratched and bit and screamed like a wild-cat, he clung to her.

"You are my prisoner, my beauty!" he said, when, powerless in his grasp, she lifted her white face to his and glared at him, panting, yet speechless.

Meanwhile, her men had lacked her pluck or her desperation. They saw that they were outnumbered, and taken at a hopeless disadvantage.

Of course there was no prospect but the hangman's noose in surrender, but in the face of immediate death they accepted the respite.

They were disarmed and bound without the discharge of a single weapon; and then the conquerors hurried to the mouth of the pocket, to secure those who were yet there on guard, unconscious that their citadel had been captured.

But Jim Farnsworth remained behind to bend over Tiger Dick in heartfelt regret.

The beneficiaries of his greatness of soul also gathered round, the Major-General remorseful for her heartless insistence. Judge Littlejohn ashamed of his suspicions, Hugh and Uncle Billy and the Hon. Benoni feeling that here was a man as great in his virtues as in his vices, and Abigail in tears of unqualified sorrow. Only ye dainty dude tried to allay an uncomfortable feeling, which was something between shame and annoyance, with a plea in self-justification.

But Tiger Dick's game with fortune was not yet played out. He lived, though unconscious of life, with a bullet through his left lung.

"It went clean through him," said Jim Farnsworth, as he took the bullet from between his skin and his clothes. "That will save the necessity for a surgical operation that we lack the appliances for."

"Dick, my boy!" he cried, cheerily, when he had restored the Tiger to consciousness, "there's the stuff in you yet for half a dozen heroes! We'll patch you up—my word for it!"

And the event proved that Jim Farnsworth was "no fool" prophet!

Dick's first care showed the quality of the man. When every word uttered was a stab at his life, and he knew it, he said:

"You know—the one condition—I stood for. Let her go!"

The detective unbound the Golden Serpent and explained to her and to the wondering members of the Committee how and why Tiger Dick had stipulated for one condition in making his bargain with the Governor.

When the Golden Serpent learned this, and that, even after her attempt on his life, he still made her freedom his first thought, she burst into tears and cast herself on her knees at his side.

Overcome by emotion, she could not speak, but only kissed his hand.

Jim Farnsworth reminded her of the danger of exciting a man in Dick's condition, in addition to the severe trial that was before him of having to be moved over rough ground in a swinging litter.

She made but one low plea.

"Say that you forgive me!"

"I do better than that," said Dick, faintly. "I remember—that the effort to save me—has been your ruin."

Once more she kissed his hand, and then rose, and without so much as a glance at any of the others, mounted the horse that was placed at her disposal, and rode away.

To the last she betrayed the essentially ungrateful nature of her heart, where her affections were not involved. In her absorption over Dick, she gave not a thought to the bold fellows who had served her faithfully, though in a bad cause.

"But how did you find your way in to us?" asked Uncle Billy.

He only knew that, at the very moment when Tiger Dick fell before the Golden Serpent's bullet, the detective and the band of ex-road-agents had come through one of the corridors of the cave.

"Too late to save the Tiger, they had lain in ambush to capture the followers of his would-be murderess."

"We owe all to the cowardice and treachery of that infernal Greaser!" replied Jim.

"They stood us off at the mouth of that ravine. An army couldn't have dislodged them. Then I proposed that we find some way over the crags. I was bound not to leave Tiger Dick in this trap, if I had to tunnel the mountain!"

"Well, I came upon the petticoated don, sneaking off by himself, and ran him down. It seems that, in watching the Golden Serpent, he had been here before, and discovered this entrance to the pocket, through the cave. That was why he led you here. He hoped for a chance to sneak off by himself and get away."

"But why not give us the advantage of his knowledge?" asked Uncle Billy, indignantly.

"He was afraid that such a crowd, especially with the ladies, would attract the attention of the Golden Serpent's people and result in recapture. He was looking out for his own skin, ye understand, first, last and always."

"And where is the wretch now?"

That question was never answered, except by surmise. It was thought probable that the don had sneaked off back through the cave, afraid to meet the company he had left to so miserable a death.

As gently as might be, Tiger Dick was carried to a neighboring mining-camp.

There Abigail divided her time between him and her lover, nursing both with a tenderness that money could not have purchased.

But in due time she was relieved of half her labor of love.

Jim Farnsworth went in person into Lower California, and returned with one whose presence was enough to call the Tiger back from the brink of the grave.

Let the reader imagine their meeting, and the care she took of him!

At the following session of the California legislature, the Report of the Committee to Investigate the Chinese Troubles at Silver Riffle was "laid on the table," with many a laughing motion that it be laid *under* the table; that it be buried, never to be called to a reading till the Day of Judgment, etc.

Uncle Billy was the only one of the Committee that took the matter good-naturedly, challenging the jokers to "go and do likewise."

Sweet Lispinard de Morgan is still in the market, ready to become the prize of the daughter of some bonanza king, who is anxious to graft a shoot of aristocracy on her ancestral scrub oak.

Hugh runs a journal of his own; and the Major-General, reconciled to him in a measure, is "working the sheet for all it is worth" as her "organ."

Judge Littlejohn still says "*Hang her!*" in "French!"

But down in that silvan Paradise in Lower California, which the reader has already visited with us for a short period, lies a man in a hammock, and hovering about him is a woman with the smile of a happy angel.

Among other things, she has been reading to him the glowing praises of his courage and magnanimity with which the papers ring all over the land.

"But this," he says, laying his hand on a rather formidable-looking document, bearing the great seal of the State of California—"this is the bridge over to happiness and love!—over to the new life!"

And she, glancing over to where an old gentleman is nodding drowsily, with his wig a little awry, and so assuring herself that her heart will be revealed only to him for whom it is ever more to be an open book, throws her arms about his neck, and with her lips to his, whispers:

"My husband!"

THE END.

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